

Deaths DAUGHTER AND THE Ebony BLADE

◆ MAITO
AYAMINE

◆ ILLUST.
CIERRA





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Characters

Kingdom of Fernest



**Claudia
Jung**

A proud knight who accompanies Olivia as her aide. Uses *Heaven's Sight*.



**Ashton
Senefelder**

Making a name for himself after Paul praised his peerless tactical mind.



**Olivia
Valedstorm**

A girl raised by a god of death. Descended from the Deep Folk.



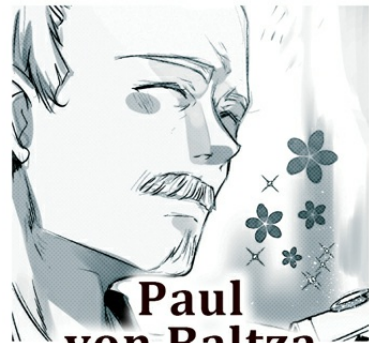
**Ellis
Crawford**

A female soldier who adores Olivia, calling her "Big Sister".



**Otto
Steiner**

Paul's aide. Often ends up the victim of Olivia's whims.



**Paul
von Baltza**

The old general at the head of the Seventh Legion. Though known as the God of the Battlefield, he has a soft spot for Olivia.

**Lambert
von Garcia**

Also known as Lambert the Bold. Second-in-command of the First Legion.

**Cornelius
vim Groening**

Renowned as the Invincible General. Supreme Commander of the First Legion.

**Alphonse
sem Gallmond**

The King of Fernest.

**Sara
sun Rivier**

Fourth princess of Fernest and commander of the Sixth Legion.

**Blood
Enfield**

The general at the head of the Second Legion. Though his rough manner sticks out, he is an adroit tactician and a first-rate swordsman.

**Neinhardt
Blanche**

Aide in the First Legion and Claudia's cousin.

Asvelt Empire



**Felix
von Sieger**

One of the empire's Three Generals.
He commands the Azure Knights.
Descendent of the Asura,
the enemy of the Deep Folk.

Rosenmarie von Berlietta

One of the empire's Three Generals.
She commands the Crimson Knights.
Currently recuperating after her loss to Olivia.

Darmés Guski

Imperial Chancellor.
Using the power of a God of Death
to manipulate the emperor.

Holy Land of Mekia



**Sofitia
Hell Mekia**

Seventh in the line of Seraphs,
she rules Mekia with irresistible charisma.



Lara Mira Crystal

Commander-in-chief and Blessed Wing
of the Winged Crusaders.
Her loyalty to Sofitia is absolute.



**Johann
Strider**

A Senior Thousand-Wing
in the Winged Crusaders.
Flippant and brazen.



**Amelia
Stolast**

A Thousand-Wing
in the Winged Crusaders.
Both merciless and cruel.

Others

Z

The god of death that took in Olivia and raised her.
Disappeared one day without warning.

Xenia

A second god of death.
Using Darmés for his power to achieve
some unknown end.



Death's Daughter
and the Ebony Blade

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Illust. **Cierra**

Prologue: The Jewel of the South

The United City-States of Sutherland was formed from thirteen cities in the south of Duvedirica. Each city retained political autonomy, while Union policy was decided by the Council of the Thirteen Stars, an assembly comprised of the lords of each city.

As a nation, it boasted a population of a hundred million, placing it among the ranks of the Kingdom of Fernest and the Asvelt Empire as one of the three great nations of Duvedirica. All thirteen cities kept their own standing army, and in the Charter of the Sutherland Thirteen it was stipulated that, in a time of crisis, these armies would form a coalition force to address a foreign threat.

This is getting troublesome... a young man thought as he made his way down the corridor. He was a soldier in the army of the Third City of Bay Grand, which was in possession of the most extensive domain of all thirteen cities. Report clutched in one hand, he headed for the lord's office.

This young man, with his soft, bright eyes, was Julius lila Fiphus. He was a general at only twenty-two summers old, but he hadn't gotten there by the preeminence of the Fiphus name alone.

He had extraordinary talent as a strategist and tactician and had amply demonstrated as much. This, combined with a number of instances of good luck, had established him in his current position. Along with his genial disposition, he was a topic of some interest among the ladies.

Julius proceeded down the corridor, exchanging salutes with the other officers he passed until he came to a halt in front of an elaborately carved door. The design was one of seventh-century sculptor Trois Schiele's, a dynamic swirl of flowers intricately etched into its surface.

"Is the lord in?" Julius asked.

"Yes, ser! His Lordship is already in attendance," the guard answered with a salute. Julius nodded, took a breath to settle himself, then clenched his fist and

knocked lightly on the door.

“Excuse me, my lord,” he said as he opened the door.

Standing atop a perfectly conical hill, Rizen Castle was a magnificent construction. It almost seemed to float amongst the clouds, the sight of which had led the common folk to call it “the castle in the sky.” Julius stepped into the room, walled all around with glass and commanding a sweeping view over the city. There, behind a heavy desk, sat the commander in chief of the Bay Grand Army, Leon von Elfriede. He stared intently at Julius.

“Whenever you make that face, often as not it means you’ve come to me with trouble.”

Julius was taken aback at the first words out of Leon’s mouth. He hadn’t meant to let any of his feelings show on his face, but the comment hit so close to the mark that he found himself unable to immediately respond. Wincing internally, he made himself approach the desk.

“You understand me better than I understand myself, Lord Leon,” he said.

Leon scoffed. “What’s all this now? You’ve been on me like a rash since we were children. It’s only natural that I can glean that much.” Holding out a careless hand, he said, “Now, am I correct in thinking that whatever you have in your hand there is the culprit behind that look on your face?”

Julius passed him the report and Leon skimmed over it. His well-sculpted physique was readily apparent, even hidden under his dark green military uniform. His hair was so blond as to be almost transparent, and his clean-cut features lent nobility to his countenance. His eyes, with their unique, iridescent irises, shone keenly, like the edge of a blade forged with the most painstaking efforts of a master smith.

Yet the only one who saw down to the harsh glint hidden deeper within was Julius. Leon’s ambition was not public knowledge.

“There are signs that the Twelfth City is going to invade Fernest...” Leon said. “I really did not see that coming. Having said that, I don’t know what about this is making you worry. I can only wish them well in their endeavor.”

Julius had been so sure that Leon would be concerned by the news that, met

with this indifference, he stared back at the man as though he were contemplating a rare beast.

“Hm? Is my face so unusual? I’d have thought you’d be sick of it,” Leon said, making a show of massaging his cheeks.

“No, that’s not...” Julius stammered. “Is this right?”

Leon leaned back in his chair and frowned, his eyebrows pointing downward. This was not the response merited by an indirect question.

“Whether it’s right or otherwise isn’t the point. The thirteen cities are all of equal standing. If the Twelfth City were going to break our secret agreement with the empire, that would be a different story, but invading Fernest in and of itself? That isn’t a problem. It’s not like the empire told us to leave them alone either. This would constitute interfering in the affairs of the union. I can’t say anything.”

It was true; none of the thirteen cities were greater or lesser than the others. They *were* all of equal standing. Having said that, the reality was that they were both equal and they were not. Power differentials naturally formed based on the scales of each city. As a soldier, Julius wasn’t about to naysay a war, but at the same time, he couldn’t discern what significance there might be in the Twelfth City opening hostilities with the Royal Army at this juncture. He was apprehensive of the risk the citizenry might be exposed to should war break out. If Leon would only advise the Twelfth City as much, they surely could not ignore him.

And yet he still won’t say anything. That must mean he really has no interest, Julius thought. Knowing he was wasting his breath, he tried a different approach.

“But my lord, the United City-States of Sutherland declares nonintervention in war, as well as absolute neutrality. Aren’t the actions of the Twelfth City a clear violation of that?”

“A violation...” Leon repeated, drawing his mouth into a thin smile. “Is that really what you think, Julius?”

Julius replied with a tiny shake of his head.

At the end of the warlord period, at the height of prosperity, there had been sixty nations. By the time the unrest came to an end in 950 Tempus Fugit, fewer than half of them remained. The smaller states, worn down to the bone, formed a league for the condemnation of war. In 952 Tempus Fugit, the United City-States of Sutherland was founded, and almost at once declared a stance of nonintervention and absolute neutrality.

Around half a century had passed since then. Once more faced with unrest, Sutherland had, until now, stayed out of the fighting, watching as the war ran its course. Nonintervention and absolute neutrality were merely declarations of intent not to become complicit in the wars of any nation. They did not, however, constitute a renunciation of war altogether. What it came down to was that, while naturally they would not hesitate to repel any invader of Sutherland, no one had ever started a war with them in practice. Excluding the great nations like the Kingdom of Fernest and the Asvelt Empire, most of the others were small nations. From the Empire of Adolina to the Mystic Kingdom of Lurecia on Bay Grand's border, they squabbled over tiny scraps of land as if to take the measure of how much of each other's blood they could spill. There was no chance of a small nation intentionally picking a fight with a great nation like Sutherland, not now that it had put down its immense roots in the south.

Besides, it was crystal clear that the lords of each city were not inclined to stick to the letter of the declaration. The fact was the declaration made half a century earlier had lost all its substance. Leon wouldn't say it out loud, but he was just like the others, and that this was behind his question and his smile, Julius was at no pains to infer.

"Other countries don't believe in that outdated declaration. No one's going to come complaining just because the Twelfth City invades Fernest. It was only ever a declaration, at the end of the day."

"I'm not saying I disagree entirely..." Julius began.

"Let's assume, by some minute chance, some country does still believe in the declaration. I'd call that the height of naivety. When it comes to Sutherland, so long as no one violates the pact with the empire, anything goes," Leon finished. He tossed the papers onto his desk, as though they no longer interested him.

In 997 Tempus Fugit, around a month after the fall of the so-called “impregnable” Kier Fortress, the United City-States of Sutherland had conducted a series of secret meetings with the empire. The main topic under discussion had been cutting off the export of food supplies until Fernest fell. In return, the empire would never commit an act of war against Sutherland. In no small part due to an aversion to turning the unstoppably ascendant empire against Sutherland, the Council of the Thirteen Stars voted unanimously to accept the empire’s proposal. *But that was only ever until Fernest falls*, Julius thought. *What happens after that, I honestly couldn’t say.*

Emperor Ramza’s declaration of the unification of Duvedirica was, in turn, none other than a declaration of intent to turn the continent into a single nation. Promises were always broken, some small, others bigger. It was hard to believe the man they called Ramza the Good would so easily violate a promise, but Julius couldn’t rule out the possibility that he would find some unimaginable way to make a move on them that the people would support. Julius judged that they wouldn’t be allowed to stay mere spectators for much longer.

“How about I guess what you’re thinking right now, Julius?” Leon suggested, propping his elbow up on the armrest and resting his chin on his hand with a smug grin.

Julius screwed up his face at the young ruler. “Please, my lord, spare me the satori act. It’s in bad taste.”

“Satori? Ah, those monsters that see into the hearts of humans... There is nothing so inconstant and hollow as the human heart. If I were really capable of imitating them, then—”

“Then?” Julius asked.

“Then I wouldn’t only be the master of one city. I would take Sutherland, then the whole of Duvedirica. With you at my side, of course, Julius.” He laughed, the same innocent laugh he’d had as a child. Julius felt himself smiling back despite himself. *The guy never changes, not one bit*, he thought.

When Leon was done laughing, he assumed a serious expression. “I understand your apprehension, Julius, but you should stop worrying. It wasn’t

capriciousness or affectation that made me lord of this city. By my read, this war won't last much longer, so it's only natural that I turn my attention to what comes after. The Twelfth City aside, the lords of the other cities will all be setting their sights on the future."

"Of that, I am well aware," Julius said. "Lord Leon. I, Julius Ila Fiphus, will trust you 'til the day I die." He lowered his head in deference. Leon grinned.

"You've got some nerve," he said. "Anyway, it looks like the Twelfth City's intelligence work isn't up to snuff. Even though in this new age, they say, the advantage goes to whoever holds the most information."

"You're right, my lord. The winds are blowing in a whole new direction. I wonder if it may not be a little risky, raising a hand against Fernest at this time. They're going to burn their fingers badly."

Leon chuckled. "They'll be lucky just to come away with burns."

"You think it'll be worse?"

"A misplaced step, and Death's scythe will come down right here." He tapped his neck with two fingers. Julius nodded without a word.

They didn't operate on the same scale as the empire's shimmers, but in addition to the nation's conventional intelligence agency, Leon had his own personal intelligence network he had cultivated himself, known as the Wolfpack. The name came from the wolf tattoos they all had on their shoulders.

According to the information the Wolfpack had acquired, the successive defeat of both the Crimson Knights and the empire's most renowned Helios Knights had followed hot on the heels of the defeat of the empire's Southern Area Army. The part that had so caught their attention was the appearance in each of these battles of a girl known as the "Death God." This girl, who had also picked up the moniker of "The Ebony Executioner," had cut down one celebrated imperial commander after another, just like a god of death. There were even improbable tales where this one girl had struck terror into thousands of soldiers. Feats of valor on the battlefield were wont to gather embellishments as time went on, but in the end, the Wolfpack had concluded that this girl was an exception to the rule.

“Should we at least tell the Twelfth City what we know?” Julius asked.

Leon exhaled through his nose, then said, “You think we should tell them it’s too dangerous because a death god has joined the Kingdom of Fernest? Don’t even go there. Even if I told them, they wouldn’t believe it. Especially not *that* woman.”

“True. I doubt she would believe you,” Julius said slowly as he pictured a woman’s face, bewitching with a hint of psychosis.

He’d heard that Lady Cassandra sum Cherie, ruler of the Twelfth City of Northern Perscilla, was a terrifically haughty woman. She’d once, in what sounded like a joke, even had her cook condemned when they served her food that didn’t suit her tastes. Julius had a hunch that this invasion of Fernest was largely the product of Cassandra forcing it through. Both he and Leon were of the opinion that whatever warning they gave her, Cassandra would ignore it.

“Besides, we might be part of the same nation now, but originally, they were foreigners. I’m not such a sucker that I’d hand over the information the Wolfpack worked so hard to obtain for free. We ought to get something in exchange. And it’s a good opportunity, don’t you think?”

“To...To see the extent of Fernest’s power, you mean?”

Leon gave Julius a big and satisfied nod. “We’re not playing cards. There’s no way they emerged victorious over the Crimson Knights and the Helios Knights purely through luck. The fight between the Twelfth City and Fernest will serve as a touchstone.” He flicked the golden scales that sat on his desk.

“So the outcome of their battle will affect how we act?”

“That’s right.”

“If, hypothetically, the Kingdom of Fernest looked like it could turn the tides, what do you plan to do, my lord?” Julius asked.

Leon stared into space for a moment. “Well, now,” he said slowly. “When that happens, we cut ties with the empire and raise our flag for Fernest. If the other cities see profit for Sutherland in it, they should agree without causing trouble. That kind of mercenary thinking is their specialty, after all.” He spun his chair around to gaze out the windows, a look of contempt in his eyes. Sutherland’s

economic blockade had been extraordinarily effective in hurrying Fernest's decline. Julius pointed out that they could hardly expect Alfonse to trust them now just because they dissolved the blockade and extended a hand of friendship.

"You mean His Majesty the King, unrivaled only in how deep he dragged the name of his kingdom through the mud?" Leon said with blistering sarcasm, running his fingers through his hair. "He'll have no choice but to take that hand in the end."

He stood up slowly, extending his long legs before going over to the huge map that covered one of the walls. For a while, neither of them spoke. Whatever Leon was thinking, it didn't show in his glittering, incandescent eyes as he gazed directly at the map. Standing at his side, Julius surveyed the map as well.

To the north was the Asvelt Empire; to the east, the Kingdom of Fernest; and to the south, the United City-States of Sutherland. Much time had passed since the balance between the great nations had been broken, and the war that now raged showed no signs of stopping. It was as if the warlord period had come again. As the senseless conflict spread, already more than a few nations were heading down the path to ruin.

Julius thought of war as like stacking up building blocks as high as they would go. Just one misplaced block and eventually, the whole thing would come tumbling down.

Who'll manage to keep on stacking their blocks until the end? he wondered. *Will it be the Asvelt Empire, or Fernest? Or perhaps...*

Dark clouds gathered deeper and deeper around Rizen Castle as Julius gazed at the beautiful face of his ruler.

The year was 1000 Tempus Fugit. A new era was dawning, born of fresh bloodshed and reigned over by chaos.

Chapter One: Under the Lion Banner

I

Leticia Castle in the Royal Capital of Fis

Little birds fluttered down onto the terrace, tapping their beaks together as if to acknowledge one another. The trees were bursting with life, and long-tailed striped squirrels coiled their tails around their branches, dangling acrobatically to stuff their cheeks full of cloudy peaches.

The sun was at its zenith. The breeze carried the aroma of new leaves into the great meeting room, where the commanding generals of each of the legions stood around a long table in the center of the room.

“I know how busy you all are, so I appreciate your gathering,” said Field Marshal Cornelius vim Gruening, who had convened the meeting. He was the highest-ranking officer, joined by General Lambert von Garcia, deputy commander of the First Legion, Lieutenant General Blood Enfield of the Second Legion, Lieutenant General Sara son Rivier of the Sixth Legion, General Paul von Baltza of the Seventh Legion, and Brigadier General Neinhardt Blanche, who was present as an observer.

After exchanging salutes, they took their seats. As he looked along the length of the table, Blood broke the ice.

“Lot of empty seats compared to when this war began,” he said.

Senior General Latz Smythe of the Third Legion. Senior General Lindt Barthes of the Fourth Legion. Senior General Belmar vim Haines of the Fifth Legion. Those three generals who had all been present at the outset of the war had long since passed on to the next world. Latz and Lindt had been Blood’s friends at the military academy, Neinhardt had heard. He himself had lost his close friend General Florenz at the Battle of Alschmitz, which made Blood’s words cut all the deeper.

“Indeed,” said Paul. “Oh, those young men, passed on while old men like me linger. We could say that this is war and leave it there... But it is a cruel world we live in.” He heaved a deep sigh as a dark mood settled over the meeting room.

It was Blood who broke the silence. “You’re still young, Lord Paul. I can’t believe you’re over sixty.”

Paul sighed. “You’re still terrible at flattery. That much hasn’t changed at all since you were at the academy.” He shot a cold glance at Blood, who shrank back like a scolded child. Now, they were both generals in command of their own armies, but Neinhardt had heard that once, they had been teacher and student at the Royal Military Academy. The many anecdotes about the pair of them had become the stuff of legends, and Neinhardt had heard such tales often during his own time at the academy.

Lambert burst out laughing. “Paul leaves even Blood the Flash eating crow.” Blood winced, saying he hated that stupid nickname, which only made Lambert laugh even more heartily.

“Anyway, Lord Marshal. For what reason have you called us here today?” Sara asked, dragging the conversation away from them. “I scarcely think you mean to sit around exchanging old stories when the war is still going on?”

Cornelius gave her a courteous nod. “I have called you here on short notice for one reason. To get straight to the point, I want to establish an Eighth Legion. I thought I would present the idea to you all first.”

Establish an Eighth Legion. Not only Neinhardt, but all the others present looked conflicted. After the annihilation of the Third, Fourth, and Fifth Legions, the creation of a new legion made perfect sense. But it didn’t sit well with them after being summoned here when none of them knew what the morrow might bring. Cornelius was the marshal of the Royal Army, and Alfonse had ceded him supreme command, all of which meant he could send an army marching if he so wished. Yes, he was the commander of an army, but he didn’t have to come to them in advance with every little thing.

Paul spoke for all of them when he asked, “Is that something you have to run by us?”

“You could say that,” Cornelius replied. “You in particular, Paul, as it affects you directly.”

All eyes in the room went to Paul. So named, he looked into the distance, stroking his chin. Then his eyes went wide as he arrived at some conclusion.

“You can’t mean to put Major Olivia in command of the Eighth Legion?!”

“I should have known you’d be quick on the uptake,” Cornelius said with a small smile. Lambert, who’d just taken a mouthful of tea, spat it out.

He didn’t even bother to wipe off the spilled tea as he exclaimed, through a fit of fierce coughing, “Wh-Whoa, whoa now, hold on. Major Olivia, in command of the Eighth Legion? You can’t be serious.” His shock combined with his naturally booming voice made his words reverberate through the room. Sara, who sat beside him, winced as she shuffled her chair to one side, as well she might.

“Would it be somehow inconvenient for Major Olivia to be given command of the Eighth Legion?” Cornelius, meanwhile, added a small mound of sugar to his black tea, taking care not to raise any sound as he stirred it through. Blood wore an expression of interest as he watched the two men, one all dynamism and the other all stillness, like opposite sides of a coin.

“It’s not about the convenience of it. Yes, the girl’s feats leave the rest of us looking a little shabby. I don’t deny that. But there’s a difference between commanding a unit and commanding a whole army. You of all people should know that, Lord Marshal. And besides, she’s only ten and...ten and...”

“She’s sixteen,” Paul said tonelessly.

“Exactly. Just what Paul said, the girl is only sixteen! You can go back through the history of the kingdom, there’s never been a sixteen-year-old commander before. I am dead against this,” Lambert finished. Looking down, he realized at last that his uniform was wet. He pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and started roughly wiping himself down.

“Well,” said Cornelius, looking around the assembled faces, “that is Lambert’s view. What say the rest of you? Do not hold back. I want your honest opinions.”

At once, Sara said, “For my own part, I support Lord Cornelius’s proposal. Yes,

she is young, but I know she will do a far superior job leading an army than a decorative general like me. If you want proof, she was breathtaking in action when she came to the Sixth Legion's rescue."

No one could stop themselves from wincing at Sara's self-directed sarcasm. The fact was that she *was* only there for decoration, but if nothing else, no one in this room was about to criticize the fourth princess who served as the representative of the royal family on the front line. Nevertheless, Neinhardt had heard the whole story of what happened at Fort Peshitta. No one other than Olivia could have pulled off the trick of not only sneaking into the enemy camp alone, but then taking the enemy commander hostage and forcing them to withdraw. There'd been no sarcasm in the rest of Sara's words; they revealed her genuine belief.

"Hmm. So Lieutenant General Sara agrees... What say you, Lieutenant General Blood?"

"I'm with the princess," Blood said. "I don't have to tell you about her prowess as an individual warrior, but Liv—Major Olivia, I mean—is a dab hand as a strategist too." He looked at them with a self-deprecating smile.

"Gosh, Blood the Flash agrees with me. What an honor."

"Hey now, Princess..." Blood said, scratching his head in annoyance. Sara watched him, smiling. Lambert in turn watched the two of them. Then, unable to stay patient any longer, he let out a massive sigh.

"I understand that you feel a debt of gratitude to Major Olivia after Fort Peshitta, Your Highness," he said, "but you can't go equating that with what we're talking about here. The same goes for you, Blood."

"I do feel a debt of gratitude, that's true. But I'm not equating anything. This is the conclusion I have reached after considering as best I can Major Olivia's past military achievements."

"I'll have you know I'm not that senile yet."

Sara shot Blood another smile while he looked fed up. Lambert and Blood continued to argue. They butted up against one another, their opinions divided clean down the middle.

“She’s massively inexperienced.”

“Whatever she lacks in experience she can more than make up for with talent.”

At last, Blood rubbed his head again and said, “I’m the commander of a legion too. I saw her in action on the central front, and all I’m saying is that, based on that, she’s more than up to the task. Look, we might be on a winning streak at the moment, but we are walking on thin ice. We can’t afford to ask how old she is, or whether there’s precedent. But that’s just the opinion of one stupid, lowly officer.”

Lambert gritted his teeth and folded his arms. He looked like he’d swallowed something unpleasant.

Thin ice... Well, Lieutenant General Blood is absolutely right. The moment a crack appears, we’ll all plummet to the bottom of a cold lake, and there’ll be nothing we can do about it. And we won’t float back to the surface.

The Second and Seventh Legions might have won, but they’d sustained many losses. The battle with the Helios Knights had diminished the strength of the First Legion as well. They couldn’t afford optimism here. The Royal Army was battered and bruised, and it wasn’t hard to see that the fighting would only grow fiercer. Lambert fell silent, showing that to some degree, he accepted Blood’s point.

Neinhardt also agreed with Blood and Sara. At the very least, he didn’t think age or precedent were valid reasons to reject the idea. The feats Olivia had achieved while in command of a single unit were simply too monumental. At this rate, she was going to throw the whole army totally out of balance.

Yet Lambert still couldn’t accept it. He immediately changed tack.

“Then what, my lord, do you propose to do about her rank? No one’s going to stand for a major in command of a whole legion. This isn’t just a question of precedent or what have you.”

Lambert was right. It was a rule that the commander of a legion had to be at least a brigadier general. Putting a major in command would inevitably make her the subject of outside derision.

They all waited, wondering what Cornelius would say next. The marshal took a long sip of his tea, savoring the aroma before he spoke.

“I appreciate that, of course. I plan to hold a conferral ceremony in the next few days. There, I will promote Olivia Valedstorm to major general.”

Blood whistled admiringly. Sara showed her approval with a gratified smile.

Staring up at the ceiling, Lambert let out a long sigh.

“Major general, just like that...” he said. “Well, in that case there’ll be no issue putting her in command of a legion. But as well you know, Lord Marshal, Neinhardt here is a brigadier general.” Lambert threw Neinhardt a glance. It was obvious how he was trying to manipulate the conversation, and Neinhardt winced internally. *I’d honestly prefer you didn’t make an example of me here*, he thought.

With a few exceptions, the army was a world dictated by merit. If you had success in battle, you were promoted. It wasn’t uncommon, these days, for a soldier to end up serving under another who had once been their subordinate. Neinhardt recognized that there had never been anything like a five-rank accelerated promotion, but he didn’t hold anything against Olivia.

“Lord Lambert, they say that King Julius zu Fernest, the founding father of this kingdom, prized valor in battle above all else,” Neinhardt said. “I’m sure if he were here now, he wouldn’t hesitate to agree with the marshal. Needless to say, I agree with him too.”

He deliberately invoked the first king of Fernest, making his feelings clear that if the conversation went any further, it was going to cause him no end of trouble.

“The thing is, it hasn’t even been two years since Major Olivia enlisted. Now, if we were talking about Neinhardt, who wants for neither accomplishment nor popularity, I’d be right there behind you.”

Alas, Neinhardt’s efforts were in vain. Lambert explicitly proposed him as a candidate. For his part, Neinhardt honestly wished he’d drop it.

“Lord Lambert, if the man himself has no objections, isn’t that enough?” Sara said, coming to Neinhardt’s defense. “And if it’s accomplishments we’re talking

about, I know of no other who has amassed so much success on the battlefield in so short a time.”

Neinhardt gave her a small nod of thanks, and she winked back at him—not very royal behavior, but it was things like this that made so many soldiers love her.

Lambert huffed loudly. “Forgive me, Your Highness, I don’t expect you to understand, but men have pride. Especially a warrior like Neinhardt.”

“Men...have pride?” Sara echoed Lambert’s words back to him, cocking her head in puzzlement.

“That’s right. Men have pride,” Lambert affirmed, throwing his chest out.

Oh, so that’s something I have, Neinhardt thought, admiring that Lambert was going to such pains to look out for his pride as a man, something he hadn’t even realized he possessed. As grateful as he was for his commander’s benevolence, however, he had to head this off before the conversation got any more ridiculous.

Neinhardt cleared his throat a few times, then sat up straight. “My lord Lambert the Bold. I can’t express my gratitude enough that you would speak so highly of me, but between Major Olivia and myself, if we consider which the imperial army will see as a greater threat, the question answers itself. I come up short.”

It was an incontrovertible fact that Death God Olivia, as she was called, struck terror into the hearts of the empire’s soldiers. What the Royal Army needed at the present moment was Olivia, whose overwhelming strength as a warrior had propelled her to the rank of hero—and absolutely not a run-of-the-mill general like Neinhardt.

“Well,” Lambert said grudgingly, “if Neinhardt has no objection, I suppose that’s all right...” He turned away, disappointment writ plain on his face. He apparently wasn’t convinced by his own answer.

Cornelius had listened to them in silence. Now, his mouth a thin line, he folded his arms and turned a searching gaze at Paul.

“You’ve been very quiet, Paul,” he said. “What do you think?”

Everyone looked at Paul again.

“My honest answer is that I am against it,” he replied. This, as far as Neinhardt was concerned, was a perfectly reasonable reaction.

Leaving Lambert’s satisfied nod and *I knew you’d understand, Paul*, anyone who knew how Paul was around Olivia would see that he wouldn’t let her go easily.

Cornelius ran a hand through his beard and murmured, “Hmm. You’re against it too...”

“I will say, though, it’s not for the same reasons Lambert raised,” Paul amended. Lambert’s eyes immediately took on a harsh glint as he glared at Paul. It was a look that would have easily shut up any ordinary man, but Paul went on unconcerned. “I simply fear that this is going to diminish the strength of the Seventh Legion. These days, the Seventh Legion relies heavily upon Major Olivia and her independent regiment.”

“Very fair,” Cornelius said, nodding twice.

“In addition, if I may be selfish for a moment, I also want to keep her close. I truly care for her like my own grandchild,” he said, and his eyes crinkled in a doting smile.

Blood’s eyes went wide. Even for those who knew Paul well, it had to be quite a shock to see him like this. It was hard to believe that this was the same man who’d been named the God of the Battlefield and was feared in far-off lands.

“Lieutenant General Blood, is something the matter...?” Princess Sara, who had no way to know of the bond between Paul and Blood, watched the sudden change in Blood’s demeanor with doubtful eyes. The unexpected reaction came from Lambert, who shook his head deplorably. Cornelius, on the other hand, gazed intently at Paul. Anyone could see he was taken aback, if not to the same extent as Blood.

Paul and Blood’s bond must run deeper than it first appears, thought Neinhardt.

“Am I having a bad dream?” Blood muttered. “To think I’d see Instructor Paul making a face like that. The shock might summon Latz and Lindt back to life...”

The look Paul gave him was ice cold. “So that’s it then,” he said. “I see all too well how you think of me now. Looks like a good, long talk is in order when we’re done here.”

“A-Anything but that, ser...” Blood said, shrinking away from Paul again like a turtle retreating into its shell. Paul huffed through his nose.

The meeting continued, with Lambert expressing his discontent every step of the way. In the end, as the light of the setting sun turned the room deep red, the decision was officially made: Olivia would serve as the first commander of the Eighth Legion. At the same time, they settled on their strategy.

“Very well,” Cornelius declared. “With this, we strike back against the imperial army.” Everyone rose to their feet and saluted.

They named the operation the Twin Lions at Dawn. It would be the Eighth Legion’s first objective: the invasion of the imperial capital of Olsted.

II

Three days had passed since the war council at Leticia Castle. During that time, Olivia spent every day playing energetically with the children until dusk. That wasn’t to say she was in any way neglecting her military duties. After uncovering the reason for the extinction of the Valedstorm line, she had tried to return to Windsome Castle where the Seventh Legion was based, only for Cornelius to send orders that she was to remain in the capital a while longer. In those spring days, the revelry amongst the people lulled as normalcy settled in, and the soft rays of the sun shone over—

“Give up yet?” Olivia’s cheerful voice rang out across the square.

“Like I’d give—agh!” squawked a girl with light brown hair tied with a big red ribbon. “Olivia, you did Swift Step, didn’t you! I *told* you, that’s cheating!” She unleashed a hail of punches at Olivia’s stomach, her hair swishing behind her. Her name was Patty Sullivan, and she was the only daughter of Arkady and Anne, the couple who ran the Ashcrow Inn, where Olivia and her friends were

staying.

Olivia laughed. "Sorry, I just can't help it," she apologized, scratching her cheek.

"Hmph," Patty grumbled. Never letting her gaze leave Olivia, she said, "I reckon you just hate losing."

"Oh, I don't think so," Olivia said, remembering the one time she'd almost lost to Ashton at chess. Just as Ashton had assumed a triumphant grin, Olivia had found herself overcome by dizziness and collapsed with all her might right on top of the board. Of course, the pieces had been scattered. She still remembered the look on Ashton's face, as though the world were ending. She'd kindly told him that the most dangerous moment is actually when you think victory is certain. He'd given her a thunderous look and then thrown a chess piece at her.

"Well, you know," Patty said, "you're supposed to let kids win."

"Why do I have to do that?" Olivia asked. Sometimes in war, you would pretend to lose to lure your enemy into complacency, but this was just hide-and-seek. There was no reason she could see to let Patty win just because she was a child.

Patty, seeing that Olivia was confused, raised a finger, and said authoritatively, "That's what grown-ups look for in a good woman."

"A good woman?"

"That's right. You're a real fine lady, Olivia, so you'd better remember that," Patty advised her with a scholarly air. Olivia was utterly bamboozled by the description of "a real fine lady." She decided to cover her confusion by laughing. Just then, Patty's young friend Griffin Noah popped his head out of the bushes.

"Aha! Found you, Griffin!"

"You didn't find me, I came out myself," he protested.

"What'd you do that for?"

Griffin, his signature green scarf wrapped around his neck, sighed in exasperation. "I waited for *ages*, but you didn't come looking," he said.

“Anyway, you did Swift Step *again*, Olivia?”

“Yeah, she did. You tell it to her straight, Griffin,” Patty said, ushering Griffin to come and stand in front of Olivia, and staring at him.

Eventually he turned bright red and mumbled, “You...You be careful next time.”

“Okay, I will!” Olivia replied.

“Hey, Griffin? How come every. Single. *Time*, you see Olivia, you end up going red?!” Patty demanded, stamping her foot as she rounded on Griffin. Griffin looked away, playing dumb as he mumbled his rebuttal.

To Olivia’s eyes, Griffin’s face was clearly red. For whatever reason, Griffin tended to turn as red as a boiled octopus every time Olivia looked at him. He wasn’t the only one. Ashton and other men were the same.

At first, Olivia had worried that they had scarlet gland fever. This was an infectious disease carried by the Smellie Fly. The onset of symptoms was marked by the face turning red, followed by a high fever and, if it drew out, the worst cases ended in death. It was a terrifying disease.

Olivia had caught and forced an unwilling Ashton to imbibe a medicine she’d concocted herself, but he’d gone right on turning red. As a test, she’d given the medicine to other men, but that had produced the same result. In the end, none of them presented with a high fever, so Olivia concluded that men were simply that sort of animal.

Even Ellis often turned red for some reason, despite being a woman. Evanson had explained, “My sister’s got a special affliction. Even a healer couldn’t fix it, so don’t let it concern you, ser,” like he was apologizing, though, so she didn’t count.

“Hmph,” Patty pouted. “You’re going to be my husband in the future, Griffin. *Furthermore*, it’s decided that I’m gonna inherit the Ashcrow Inn! So I’ll never, ever, *ever*, let you be unfaithful!”

“I-I get it!” said Griffin, his voice a mosquito-like whine as he quailed before Patty. He glanced at Olivia, and she smiled at him, which made his face turn an even deeper red. Patty, seeing this, started berating him like a dog gnawing on

a bone. She was the spitting image of Anne when she fought with Arkady, like a miniature version of the woman.

“Major, *there* you are.” Claudia appeared out of a corner of the square, a look of relief spreading across her face as she spotted Olivia. She hurried over, pushing back her rumpled blonde hair.

“Claudia, perfect timing! You can play hide-and-seek with— Griffin? What’s wrong?”

Until only moments ago, Patty had been heckling Griffin, but now, he came up behind Olivia and tugged hesitantly at her sleeve. Olivia was impressed. His stealth techniques had to be on a level with Z for him to have gotten behind her without her noticing. With training, he could probably become a brilliant swordsman.

“Is that pretty lady your friend, Olivia?” Griffin asked, peeking out past her sleeve at Claudia with rapt attention. When Claudia turned her gaze on him, he ducked back behind Olivia. It was the same way he’d behaved when Patty had introduced him to Olivia.

“Oh, right. You haven’t met her yet, have you, Griffin? This is Claudia. She’s a fellow soldier and my friend.” Olivia put a hand on his back and pushed him in front of Claudia. At first, Griffin seemed uncertain, but then he bashfully spread his fingers in greeting.

“N-Nice to meet you. I’m Griffin Noah. I’m five,” he said. Claudia’s face lit up with a smile soft as cotton fluff. It was an expression Olivia had never seen on her before.

“Aren’t you all grown-up! Introducing yourself properly like that. I’m Claudia Jung.”

Griffin gave a shy laugh then, shifting nervously from foot to foot, and asked, “Um, Claudia? Want to play hide-and-seek with us?”

Claudia squatted down and looked at Griffin straight on. “I’m sorry. Olivia and I have military affairs—we have work to do, so we have to go to the castle.”

“Oh...” Griffin replied, crestfallen. Claudia smiled apologetically, then gently stroked his silky blond hair.

“Will you ask me again next time?”

“O-Okay. I understand. Next time, for sure.” Griffin nodded like one of the bobblehead dolls on sale at the market stalls.

Patty had been watching him from behind. The formidable look on her face as she went over and seized Griffin’s collar in a viselike grip made it hard to believe she was only five years old. Practically dragging him behind her, she set off towards a corner of the square.

Olivia was reminded of the scary imp from her picture book *The Endless Cook*, and wondered if Griffin wasn’t about to be thrown in a pot and turned into stew.

As he gazed back at her imploringly, she smiled and waved before turning back to Claudia. The other girl stared after Griffin, worry in her eyes.

“Was there a message from the castle?” Olivia asked.

“Oh, yes. Lord Cornelius has something to say to you directly.”

“Huh. Did you hear why he kept us waiting so long?”

“I was not informed, but I imagine this will involve talk of promotion.” Claudia beamed, from which Olivia guessed “promotion” was one of Claudia’s favorite things. Before Claudia could talk too much, Olivia quickly evacuated the square. Looking back over her shoulder, she caught sight of Griffin trying to make his tiny body even smaller as Patty made him bow before her in apology.

III

Field Marshal Cornelius’s Workroom in Leticia Castle

“I am sorry to have detained the two of you here so long,” Cornelius said.

“Not at all, ser.” Claudia had never been in Cornelius’s workroom before, and a wave of awe swept over her as she entered. As befitted the lord marshal, all the furnishings were of the highest quality, and besides the furnishings, shields, suits of armor, and other armaments stood tidily around the room. Her eye was drawn to one sword above the rest, hanging on the left-hand wall. Its blade was a little shorter than a standard longsword, and it gleamed an icy blue. The

pommel, which looked like gold, was engraved with the two-headed serpent of the Empire of Lemuria.

So that's the fabled blade Lemuria. They say the world has never seen its like. It's just as beautifully made as I imagined.

Claudia stood there transfixed for a while until Cornelius cleared his throat. "If it interests you," he said, "we shall set some time aside for it afterwards. So for now, do sit down."

Claudia saw that Cornelius was already sitting on the sofa, as was Olivia. Realizing that she was the only one standing around taking her time, she felt her face grow hot.

"I-I beg your pardon, ser!" she said. She bowed, flustered, then hurried over to sit down behind Olivia. Adjusting her posture, she got a good look at the other girl and saw in disbelief that she was starting in on the sweets laid out on the table. Claudia felt her head spin.

"Major! You can't just start eating those sweets!"

"What? I didn't *just* start. Lord Cornelius told me to eat up," Olivia explained. She kept reaching for more sweets even as she spoke, popping one after another into her mouth with a blissful smile.

Claudia turned to Cornelius. "Lord Marshal, I am most exceedingly sorry!" she said, bowing so low that her forehead brushed the table. It didn't matter if Cornelius had offered. Under no circumstances was it acceptable to idly stuff yourself with sweets. This was not a break room, after all. All Claudia knew was that there'd be hell to pay if Otto ever found out about it.



Just as the first wave of cold sweat abated, she felt another rise up.

“Do sit up, Lieutenant Claudia,” Cornelius told her.

“Yes, ser!” She looked up anxiously to find Cornelius smiling, amused. He didn’t look at all angry, and Claudia felt her chest fill with relief. He watched Olivia stuff herself with sweets with kindness in his eyes, as though he were watching his own beloved grandchild.

“Do you like the sweets, Major Olivia?” he asked.

“Yeah, they’re *super* delicious!”

“Address your senior officer as ‘ser’!” Claudia snapped.

“—they’re delicious, *ser*,” Olivia corrected herself. Oblivious to Claudia’s feelings, she kicked her feet back and forth in high spirits. For her own part, what Claudia wanted more than anything was to get out of this room as fast as possible.

“Super delicious, is that right? Good, good. My wife is quite the baker, you know. When I told her about you, Major Olivia, she was up at the crack of dawn churning out mountains of sweets. She’ll be delighted when I pass on what you said. Which is to say,” Cornelius said, turning to Claudia, “you needn’t hold back either, Lieutenant Claudia. Eat up.” Eyes crinkling, he held out the pure silver platter to her, freshly stacked with baked goods.

Claudia stared at it, gulping as her mouth started watering. *I never would have guessed she was the one who made these*, she thought. Cornelius’s wife, Duchess Sabrina vim Gruening, had long presided over high society. She was a pinnacle of dignity and refinement, a great lady who was known, behind her back, as the empress.

There was a story about her that went as follows. The year was Tempus Fugit 960. Sabrina had waited until Cornelius and his men were away from the domain, then quickly donned a suit of armor, took the few remaining guards, and rode out to meet Gerbera, one of Cornelius’s soldiers who plotted to raise an army to incite rebellion. Under cover of darkness, they fell upon the wholly unsuspecting Gerbera’s camp in a surprise attack. Sabrina herself fought fiercely, and in the end, she herself succeeded in slaying Gerbera. They said that

when Cornelius rushed home upon hearing the news of the rebellion, Sabrina met him with a blood-splattered smile, telling him, “I went ahead and punished those malcontents who were stirring up trouble in our territory.”

Being who she was, Sabrina continued to wield great influence in the present day, despite having already withdrawn from society. Even the famed Lambert the Bold became meek as a kitten in front of her. And *Sabrina* had baked the sweets in front of them now. She knew that her mother, Elizabeth, would fall over in a faint if she ever learned her daughter hadn’t had a single bite.

There’s nothing else for it. This is just another part of military duty. Let’s think about it like that. Telling herself this, Claudia reached timorously for a baked good of a manageable size. As she put it in her mouth and started to quietly chew, right away she tasted a delicate sweetness. *Well, I have to admit it’s delicious...* She shouldn’t have been in any place to savor baked goods, and yet she somehow found herself swallowing it down. Partly just as a way out of the situation, which felt like something close to torture, she straightened her back and broached the matter under discussion herself.

“Lord Marshal, you summoned us here today...?” she inquired.

“Hm?” Cornelius looked at her. “Oh, yes. Just so. How remiss of me, forgetting the whole point of our meeting. Everything gets away from you when you get old,” he said. He reached into his pocket as he spoke, pulling out a piece of paper folded in three that he held out to Olivia. She took it, unfolding it without ceremony and skimming the contents before immediately losing interest and handing it to Claudia. After confirming with the other two that it was all right, Claudia went through it: a new Eighth Legion was to be established, Olivia was to be appointed as its first commander, and, in accordance with her new appointment, she was to be promoted to major general.

This...This goes far and away beyond what I expected. I can’t believe all of this... First of all, if Claudia’s memory served her, no one had ever been promoted to major general before they turned twenty, let alone commanded an entire army—it was unbelievable. Even Lieutenant General Sara, a princess and commander of the Sixth Legion, had seen twenty summers when she was made major general. Olivia had racked up another achievement that it was fair to say was of heroic proportions.

Before Claudia could open her mouth in her excitement, Cornelius said, “Details will follow later, but the contents are as you see there. Any objections?”

In response, Olivia looked out into space as though considering something, but before long, her ebony eyes glittered as she focused back on Cornelius. “Major general is more important than senior colonel, right, ser?” she asked.

“Hm? I’m not sure I understand the point of the question, but that is correct.”

Olivia grinned as she readily accepted the promotion from Cornelius. Claudia knew better than anyone that Olivia didn’t have an ambitious bone in her body. A theory as to the reasoning behind Olivia’s acceptance quickly occurred to her, and she repressed a massive sigh.

“Good. Very well; as of this moment, you are promoted to Major General Olivia Valedstorm. You are also granted the appointment of first commander of the Eighth Legion.”

“Thank you, ser! As of this moment, I am Major General Olivia, appointed as commander of the Eighth Legion.”

Jumping up from the sofa, she saluted smartly. Unfortunately, cake crumbs came cascading off her uniform, which honestly ruined the effect.

“And you, Lieutenant Colonel Claudia, will continue to advise Major General Olivia as her aide.”

“Yes, ser!” Claudia barked, then paused. “Excuse me, Lord Marshal?”

“What is it?”

“I’m not... Did you say Lieutenant Colonel, ser?” She asked the question despite herself, thinking she’d misheard. Olivia’s case was exceptional, but she could appreciate promoting a successful soldier to a rank higher than was necessary to raise the morale of an army in an inferior position. Even taking that into consideration, a three-rank promotion was thoroughly irregular. At least as far as Claudia knew, no one from her cohort had been promoted to a field officer rank. Only Lise had the potential to also be promoted to such a rank.

Seeing Claudia’s bewilderment, Cornelius smiled. “You are dissatisfied with

lieutenant colonel?”

“O-Of course not, ser! I will continue to assist Major General Olivia to the very best of my abilities!” She couldn’t imagine being dissatisfied. When her parents heard the news, they’d be over the moon. Claudia stood up so forcefully she thought her back might cramp up and gave an especially respectful salute.

“Well then, you have your orders.”

“Yes, ser!”

They chatted about this and that for a little longer; then Cornelius sent off Olivia and Claudia and sat down at his desk. He opened the upper right drawer to reveal a letter on high-quality paper that carried a faint scent of perfume. *Now, what to do about this...* Cornelius mused to himself as his thoughts turned to the letter sent from a small country in the west of Duvedirica—the Holy Land of Mekia.

IV

After leaving Cornelius’s workroom behind them, Olivia and Claudia had just made it to the end of the corridor that led to the central courtyard when Claudia’s footsteps came to an abrupt halt.

“What’s up?” Olivia asked, turning back to see Claudia looking even more serious than usual.

“I will take my leave of you here, my lady,” Claudia said.

“Huh? Come on, it’s lunchtime. Let’s go eat.” Olivia pulled out her silver pocket watch, opened the cover, and showed it to Claudia. The hands were pointing straight up. She’d just eaten those sweets, but this was this and that was that. If she didn’t eat properly, the troupe of musicians in her belly would start making a racket.

“My apologies, Lady Olivia. As much as I am grateful for the offer to dine with you, with the establishment of the Eighth Legion, there is a great deal to attend to. To be frank, I don’t have a moment extra to spare for eating lunch.”

Olivia cocked her head at Claudia. Attending to the establishment of the Eighth Legion couldn't possibly be more important than lunch. More than anything else, you couldn't fight a war on an empty stomach—that's what the books said, and Olivia thought so too.

Claudia, meanwhile, was looking between Olivia's face and the brand-new major general rank insignia at her collar with a gleeful smile, chuckling under her breath.

That's scary, Olivia thought.

"R-Right. Then I'll just go to the mess hall alone," she replied. This looked like it would get tiresome if it drew out any further, so she decided to withdraw quickly. Claudia saluted, her face stern. Olivia thought her back looked even straighter than usual.

"Very good, ser! I hope you have a pleasant meal! Now, I must take my leave!"

"Um. Right. See you later, then." Olivia waved awkwardly.

Claudia strode away with a spring in her step as though she were walking on clouds, muttering, "We've got lots to do..."

Awestruck, Olivia watched her go. Then, true to her word, she headed for the mess hall reserved for high-ranking officers. She'd come to the castle several times now, so she had no trouble finding her way. *Hmm, she thought, Claudia was really laying it on thick with 'my lady.'* *She's always called me by my rank, so it's not that weird...but 'my lady'? Should I start acting more superior? General Paul and Lord Cornelius aren't very superior...but most other humans are...*

Just then, Olivia noticed her own figure reflected in a window. She experimented with folding her arms and drawing herself up to her full height, legs planted apart. Olivia was, for the most part, indifferent to clothing, but she thought the dark blue of the uniform suited her rather well, and the way it set off her silver hair wasn't so bad either. To her disappointment, however, she didn't look at all superior. She tried a stern expression, then ran through a series of different poses, but none of them felt quite right. *I guess it just doesn't suit me. I mean, I still don't even really understand what being superior is all*

about... she thought. Still, I'd like to pull it off at least once.

As she walked back down the corridor, she saw, coming towards her with precisely measured steps, the familiar figure of Otto—otherwise known as the “Walking Military Code” and “Mr. Rule-Lover.” These were, of course, names Olivia had given him. As usual, he was frowning. Olivia now remembered that Paul’s return to the castle with the others had come up in her chat with Cornelius.

Hah! My promotion to major general is coming in handy right away! This must be what they call Strecia’s will! She gave the golden badge affixed to her collar a quick flick, then walked on clearing her throat so as to be sure to draw attention to herself. She also clasped her hands behind her back to try and project as much superiority as possible.

When Otto noticed Olivia, he immediately stepped towards the wall and saluted.

Eee! Eee hee! Otto saluted before me! What a day! Olivia forced down the laughter that threatened to burst out of her. Without her even needing to show it off, it seemed news of her promotion to major general had reached Otto.

“Well, well, well, Senior Colonel Otto! Haven’t seen you around for a while!” Olivia said, getting well and truly carried away with her newfound superiority. Her point of reference was Dominic, the traitor she’d killed at Fort Glacia. He was the most superior human she’d ever met.

Otto replied without missing a beat. “It has indeed been a long time, ser,” he said. He actually said “ser.”

At this, Olivia couldn’t keep the laughter in any longer. “Tee hee!” she giggled.

Otto looked at her searchingly. “Did I say something amusing, Major General?”

Although she’d gotten used to it, Olivia still found military formality grating in general. Despite this, hearing it coming out of Otto’s mouth was like music to her ears.

“Oh, nothing,” she said. “Gee, it’s really been a while, though, eh? Hanging in there?” Getting further carried away, she gave him an experimental pat on the

shoulder. In the past, if she'd tried anything like that Otto would have bellowed at her like an ogre, then banged his fist on the table, she had no doubt. Otto loved banging his fist on tables. Otto's eyes briefly went to the hand on his shoulder, but then he looked back at Olivia without commenting on it.

"I am, ser. Your consideration is appreciated. I am glad to see you in good health yourself."

Olivia observed Otto's expressionless face and remembered she'd heard that senior officers weren't happy to find themselves serving under their former subordinates. She didn't care about her position one bit—if it meant even one fewer place where she had to conform to military formality, that was good enough for her. Though that wasn't the only reason she'd accepted the promotion.

Olivia didn't know how Otto really felt about all this, but he didn't show an ounce of irritation. He was acting as though Olivia had been senior to him from minute one. *Guess they don't call him the Man in the Iron Mask for nothing*, she thought.

"Yep, as always," she said, then remembered she was being superior and added, "I mean, fighting fit as always, sonny! Hey now, how's the missus and the little one? They live in the capital, don't they?"

Otto's eyebrows angled down ever so slightly. "Yes, ser," he said. "We do reside in the capital, and I am happy to say they are both well." He was definitely getting suspicious. Olivia didn't actually care about his wife and child, or rather, she couldn't find it in herself to care about any humans when she didn't even know their names and faces. This was no more than an imitation of an important person she'd happened to overhear talking about their family.

"Splendid, splendid," she said. "I'll bet you were happy to see them again after so long, eh?"

"Yes, I suppose, ser," Otto replied at length. Olivia gave an exaggerated nod.

"To be sure, to be sure. I myself can't wait to see Z again. Well, keep working hard at your duties, Senior Colonel," she said, then, with a final guffaw, went past Otto and started off down the corridor.

“Excuse me, Major General,” he called out from behind her in a glacial tone, “but may I have a little more of your time?” Slowly and jerkily as a rusty gear, Olivia turned back to him.

“Wh-What is it?” she asked, while in her mind she fervently repeated, *Major general is more important than senior colonel, major general is more important than senior colonel...*

Otto hesitated a moment, then said, “Your rank badge is crooked, ser. Also, your uniform is a little creased. Untidy dress reflects an untidy mind, and as a general, you ought to set a good example for your soldiers. Especially now that you will have a whole legion under your command. I trust that you won’t forget it, ser.” He reached out and quickly adjusted the badge at Olivia’s collar.

“Thank you, ser!” The words burst out of Olivia before she could stop herself. She clasped her hands over her mouth, but it was too late. Otto’s expression became severe, and he glared at her.

“It’s not proper for a senior officer to call their subordinate ‘ser,’ Major General,” he said.

“I’m very sorry, ser.” She’d said it again. She was even bowing her head deferentially to him. She groaned internally. Even though she hated military formality, for some reason *now* it rolled off her tongue. She wondered if this was a curse Otto had inflicted upon her.

“Dear me, another one, almost in the same breath as the first. What a conundrum. As a major general, one has to show firmer resolve, or else one cannot set an example for one’s subordinates.” Otto was utterly ruthless in his onslaught. His lecture went on and on, impressing upon her the importance of self-discipline and keeping an even closer eye than before on her subordinates. This was just like things had been—her promotion to major general had been for nothing.

Otto rounded off his speech by telling her that her room was a pigsty. Olivia wanted to shout at him that there was no way that had anything to do with anything, but she knew she’d only end up weathering a fierce counteroffensive. *How long is he going to keep talking?* she wondered. Otto seemed to have forgotten how to close his mouth. Other officers passed them every now and

then in the corridor, but despite Olivia's pleading looks, they all only saluted before hurrying away, pity and sympathy mingling in their eyes.

Why won't anyone help me? If Ashton were here... Never mind, Otto scares Ashton. If Claudia were here, I know she'd help me...



She now regretted not making Claudia come and eat with her, even if she'd had to drag the other girl. She'd been having fun until a moment ago, but the feeling had evaporated in a flash. She knew this was only her just deserts for kicking a hornet's nest—in the end, Olivia thought fervently, it was always best to stick to what you knew.

"As such, Major General—" Otto began, but then there was a sudden thud, and his attention was drawn away from Olivia to where the offender was frantically scooping up the piles of papers that lay strewn across the corridor.

Thank you, whoever you are! Olivia called silently. *This is my chance!* There was a momentary break in Otto's spiel, and she quickly thanked him. She thought she was going to go mad if she had to hear any more.

"Thank you for your attention, ser," Otto replied. "I must also offer my late congratulations on your promotion and assignment to the command of the Eighth Legion."

"G-Good, as you were," Olivia gabbled. Otto gave her a crooked smile, then saluted again. Eager to get away as fast as possible, she quickly saluted back, then hastened away.

A sharp voice called out from behind her, "Please, ser, walk slowly in the corridors!"

Olivia fled at top speed.

Chapter Two: For Whom We Fight

I

The Principality of Stonia in the center of Duvedirica shared a border with the Kingdom of Fernest. It was ruled by Prince Sylvester von Bernstein in concordance with four elder nobles, known colloquially as the Four Sages. The nation was divided into five regions. The central region was the domain of Prince Sylvester, while the other four, divided into north, south, east, and west, were each under the dominion of one of the Four Sages.

Like the United City-States of Sutherland, Stonia had declared neutrality when war first broke out. But now, like their neighbor the Swaran Kingdom, it was a vassal state to the empire, no better than a lapdog.

“You’re all here,” Sylvester said. In response to his summons, he and the Four Sages were gathered in a room at his home of Colchis Castle. In contradiction of the clear blue sky that stretched out above their heads, all the faces at the round table were dark and stormy. The source of the dismal mood was a letter delivered by an envoy of the empire that, in its essentials, contained an order for them to declare war on the Holy Land of Mekia.

Sylvester was thirty-eight years old. He’d inherited the title of prince, the seventeenth of his line. Before the war, his hair had been deep gold as though dipped in honey, but now it was heavily streaked with white, clear evidence of the toll those years had taken on him.

“I could understand it if they were telling us to invade Fernest, but why Mekia?” demanded the sage of the north, a vein bulging in his temple. “That land is home to the founding institution of the Holy Illuminatus Church. Invading could bring the wrath of all the faithful on the continent down on us.”

Sylvester digested this in silence. Worshippers of Goddess Strecia the Creator were in abundant supply throughout the continent. He could well imagine what

terrible revenge those worshippers might seek if he were to achieve victory in such an invasion. To further complicate matters, the Holy Illuminatus Church kept its own army, the Knights of the Sanctuary. The rumors said they were only a single division, but that they were as peerlessly elite as they were few in number. If *they* were to march, fighting against them and pushing them back would be a formidable task.

In the end, Stonia will suffer whether we win or lose. No good can come of this, only harm. It's a devious ploy on the empire's part, and yet I, the prince, can't say a word in protest. What a joke. While Sylvester brooded on his anger for which he had no outlet, the western sage turned to the northern sage and sneered, "I suggest then, Your Grace, that you ask the empire's envoy. 'Please, tell us poor fools why we must wage war on the Holy Land of Mekia.' Only, a master needn't explain himself to his dog." The northern sage's eyes widened in rage, but before he could reply, a loud *bang* shook the round table. The eastern sage, his face like thunder, had beaten it with his fist.

"If such a thing were possible, the envoy should have long ago tasted my blade! Spare us every impractical proposition. It is offensive to the extreme!"

The western sage chuckled. "Then what would you have us do? If we don't spring into action, we'll incur the empire's displeasure. The envoy awaits our reply over in the guest chambers."

The eastern and western sages exchanged a few more barbs, until they were interrupted by the southern sage, a man of close to eighty summers by the name of Roman Casael. He was the leader of the Four Sages, well-known as a moderate who had proposed their stance of neutrality in the beginning. He had also been responsible for Sylvester's education in the prince's youth.

"It is one thing for the empire to order an invasion, but when we know not even the extent of their strength..." he said hoarsely. "Does the empire expect us to investigate this too?"

"Your Venerable Lordship will find that information in the documents provided by the empire's envoy," said the northern sage, holding up a bundle of papers and drawing everyone's attention. The documents were distributed, and each man began to peruse their contents. For a while, the only sound in the

room was the rustling of turning pages.

Finally, the eastern sage tossed the papers onto the round table with a snort of irritation. “Well, the empire came prepared. They seem mighty keen on making us fight.”

“According to this, they have between forty and fifty thousand soldiers...” the western sage continued, stroking his chin. “If I recall correctly, Mekia’s population should only be around a million. Perhaps the empire made a mistake with these calculations?”

The Principality of Stonia had over three million citizens, and even *they* could mobilize at most only sixty thousand. Whether in peacetime or wartime, training soldiers cost an enormous amount of gold. With the empire already demanding financial contributions to the war effort, if they increased the size of their army, they would face not only the threat of damage to the economy but the eventual bankruptcy of the nation itself.

As such, Sylvester shared the western sage’s incredulity. But the northern sage who, of all of them, was the most knowledgeable in the state of the world, said, “No, these figures aren’t necessarily mistaken. The Holy Land of Mekia has rich mineral resources, and all their ore is of exceptional quality, not to mention their stoneworking techniques. Despite their high prices, Mekian-produced stone and ornaments practically fly out of merchants’ hands, as anyone who’s visited themselves could tell you.”

“Which is to say that, contrary to our assumptions, Mekia *can* afford to maintain a large army. A most enviable position in this day and age,” said the eastern sage, and the northern sage nodded in agreement. It was a rare moment of accord between the pair who were usually at odds over something or other.

“Prince Sylvester, I imagine the envoy’s patience will be wearing thin,” said Roman, speaking for all four sages as he tacitly urged the prince to deliver his decision. Sylvester looked up at the ceiling to avoid the old man’s milky white eyes. They had discussed many things, but Sylvester had known from the start what his answer would be.

When it comes down to it, my answer is that we never had a choice... he

thought. Feeling the eyes of the Four Sages on him, he heaved a deep sigh as though to expel all the resentment that had built up within him. Then, he spoke: “Though it grates on me to no end, we saw what happened to Swaran. We have no choice but to obey. I doubt the Helios Knights would stay quietly in their lair at Kier Fortress if we were to refuse.”

Roman nodded, the deep lines in his face deepening further as he said, “Yes, there is nothing to be done.” Although the other three looked dubious, none of them raised any argument. In a way, it was the only natural reaction. After the Helios Knight had conquered the “impenetrable” Kier Fortress, there was no room to doubt their might. So Sylvester thought as he drank his tea. It had long since gone cold.

The room grew still and gloomy, until the eastern sage, struck by some recollection, said, “That’s right. I heard a rumor that the Kingdom of Fernest defeated the Helios Knights not long ago. Is it true?”

“I cannot speak to the truth of it, but it is true that such a rumor has been spreading, mostly amongst the common folk,” the northern sage agreed magnanimously, rubbing his chin. Sylvester had heard that the Royal Army had defeated the Crimson Knights, but the empire was so dominant over Fernest that he’d assumed the miraculous victory was the result of no more than a confluence of coincidences.

But what if this rumor about the Helios Knights’ defeat turns out to be true...? he thought. It would mean that two of the three pillars supporting the empire had toppled. If the stories were to be believed, the final pillar would not fall easily. But into the midst of what had seemed like endless darkness, there now penetrated a single bright ray of hope, and Sylvester was not the only one to see it.

“Could the tides be turning?” asked the western sage, a cheerful note in his voice.

The northern sage nodded and, in the same tone, said, “Maybe so. Even the imperial army can’t go from victory to victory forever. And of course, the Royal Army has Cornelius, the Invincible General. Perhaps the war has not been going well for the empire as of late.”

“If so, it’s only too easy to see what the bastards are thinking,” said the eastern sage with an audacious grin. “I’d say they plan on whittling down our forces—before we start turning our sagacious minds to areas they’d prefer we didn’t.” Just like that, the three sages were poised to dive into another lively debate, until Roman cut in sharply.

“Be that as it may. Do you therefore intend to turn on the empire?” The other three sages looked at one another, then fell silent. Roman’s words had hit them, and Sylvester, too, like a splash of cold water. Even if it was true that the war was going badly for the empire, they in Stonia had no way of evading its demand now. Even more so if the objective was to deplete their own forces. The idea of going into an alliance with the Kingdom of Fernest did occur to him, but that would require backdoor negotiations they were far too short on time to carry out.

No matter how you look at it, we’re trapped. In the end, it’s just how I predicted at the start... Sylvester felt a self-deprecating laugh escape him. He turned to Roman and said flatly, “Summon the envoy to the audience chamber.”

II

Darmés’s Workroom at Listelein Castle in the Imperial Capital of Olsted

“—as I imagine, they are frantically debating over in Stonia as we speak. Of course no matter what they try, they’ll have no choice but to invade the Holy Land of Mekia, in the end.”

Reclining on a sofa in the center of the room, Darmés raised a cup of black tea to his lips. Five months or so had passed since the battle at Fort Astora. At Darmés’s summons, Felix had returned to the capital with his aide Teresa in tow.

“You’re certain that the surprise attack on Fort Astora was orchestrated by the Mekian army?”

“I will not say it absolutely, but yes. For my part, I am fairly certain.”

Felix listened, deftly adding sugar cubes to his tea. Darmés watched this with

great interest, though when Felix reached his seventh cube the chancellor's expression grew severe.

Felix had heard that, based on the information he had provided, Darmés had assigned the shimmers to gather intelligence. Their inquiry had turned up the Holy Land of Mekia, where they revered the Goddess Strecia. Famed as the holy land within whose borders stood the Artemiana Cathedral, Felix thought of the nation as a silent observer in this war that it had made no move to join, and thus he was more than a little surprised by Darmés's announcement.

And will the Principality of Stonia really be so compliant? he wondered. If all went as Darmés predicted, the Stonians would see through the empire's motives and still go ahead with the war with Mekia. If they were prepared to go that far, Felix saw no reason not to anticipate that they might take a gamble on betraying the empire instead. *Even if I knew certain death awaited me, I would still choose to die with my head held high,* Felix thought. When he conveyed such thoughts to Darmés, the other man laughed, a dark and unsettling cackle that echoed about the room. Felix frowned and Darmés inclined his head deeply to him.

"My sincere apologies. Your fears are understandable, Felix, but I think it most likely they will agree."

"How can you be so certain?"

"Because Prince Sylvester, the ruler of Stonia, is the very picture of mediocrity. Merely seeing through our plans will not give him the strength of spirit he needs to defy us. If you want proof, look at how he capitulated to the imperial army without a fight. If you look at it that way, the Swaran Kingdom was far superior."

Darmés rang the bell on the table before him and moments later a servant came in with fresh tea. Felix watched them, his heart full of pity for the Principality of Stonia.

Stonia's decision to avoid war with the empire and become its vassal state had likely been an astute political move, but as a result, its army was as yet unscathed, and this, in an ironic twist, was what had drawn Darmés's attention to the country now.

The news of the Helios Knights' defeat following that of the Crimson Knights could well be appealing enough to inspire troublesome notions amongst the empire's various vassal states. Felix's reading of the situation was that Darmés had chosen Stonia to make a preemptive example. *I wonder if Stonia really has a hope of defeating Mekia*, he thought. He took a slow sip of his gently steaming tea, thinking back on the documents he'd read.

The Principality of Stonia had sixty thousand soldiers. The Holy Land of Mekia had somewhere between forty and fifty thousand. Stonia undeniably had the advantage. But war was not so straightforward that its outcome could be decided by numbers alone. There was the soldiers' morale and training, and the commander's ability to look at the battlefield and deduce the optimal tactic. Furthermore, there were external factors like terrain, and weather. All of these elements came together in a complex knot. If Felix had to choose one element amongst all of them that had the strongest influence on the course of battle, he would, without hesitation, say morale.

Taking the field of battle only under duress, morale would be in critically short supply in the Stonian army. What was more, for all that it had been a surprise attack, the Mekians had proved themselves beyond question when they dominated the Crimson Knights with fewer than half the soldiers.

"Who do you think will win, Lord Chancellor?" he asked.

"I'm afraid I cannot answer that. Or more to the point, it doesn't concern me either way. Yes, this will whittle down Stonia's forces, but my primary goal here is to take measure of the Holy Land of Mekia. The fools have shown the empire their teeth."

Felix was thoroughly taken aback. He had an inkling of Darmés's nature, and he was not a man who usually favored roundabout approaches like taking measure of his foes.

"This is uncharacteristically cautious of you, Lord Chancellor," he said. Darmés's face darkened.

"Perhaps so," the chancellor replied at length. "Felix, from what I read in your report, there can be no question that the Mekian army has mages on active duty. On top of that, they say Mekia enjoys an intimate acquaintance with the

Illuminatus Church, and their pack of fanatics, the Knights of the Sanctuary, are not to be ignored.”

“The Knights of the Sanctuary...” Though these holy knights supposedly existed to defend the faithful, it was well known that their history was drenched in the blood of the heretics they had exterminated. To some extent, Darmés’s caution was not unjustified.

“The Knights of the Sanctuary aren’t the only issue. When I consider the million, perhaps even two million faithful, I think it prudent for the empire to avoid open conflict at this juncture.”

Even in Olsted, there were multiple Illuminatus congregations. Put in extreme terms, they were essentially harboring a potential enemy in their midst. Felix for his part saw no reason to go out of his way to object to Darmés’s proposed course.

“I comprehend your reasoning, Lord Chancellor.”

“I am glad to hear it. If any of them, the faithful or the knights, look like they will pose an impediment to the empire down the line, we will, of course, swiftly move to remove them,” Darmés said lightly.

He makes it sound so easy, Felix thought, but at the same time he felt a kind of conviction that it wouldn’t be beyond Darmés.

“In that case,” Felix said, sitting up straight as he broached the main point of their meeting, “what would you have me do, my lord?” Even Darmés wouldn’t have called Felix back to the capital just for what they’d discussed so far.

Darmés gave him a supremely self-satisfied smile and nodded. “Quick on the uptake, as usual. What I want, Felix, is for you to accompany the Stonian Army as a military advisor.”

“As an advisor...?”

“Indeed. I wish for you to closely observe how the Mekians fight, and ascertain whether they could pose a threat to the empire in the future. In particular, I wish for you to keep an eye on what their mages do. Having said that,” he amended, “I would put it at even odds whether they deploy mages against Stonia.”

“I expect they will,” Felix said slowly, remembering his encounter with Amelia Stolast. Darmés looked at him questioningly. He was probably waiting for some indication of acceptance, as a matter of protocol. “Understood, my lord. I am honored to accept the role of military advisor,” Felix said. “And what of the Death God Olivia? She is surely another matter. We must deal with her with the utmost haste.”

Darmés’s withered hands froze midway through reaching for his teacup. Felix looked up at him doubtfully and his gaze found Darmés looking back at him in puzzlement.

“Death God Olivia?” the chancellor repeated.

“Yes, Death God Olivia.”

“Ahh,” Darmés said at last. “You mean the girl with the ebony blade.” He paused, his mouth twisting. “A death god is a being that holds absolute power over death,” he explained. “I find it quite absurd to bestow the name on one as insignificant as her.” He sounded for all the world like he spoke from acquaintance with a real death god.

“Be that as it may, that girl has had a hand in all our recent defeats. As I said, we need to deal with her, and quickly.”

“You may forget the girl for the time being,” Darmés said.

Felix couldn’t believe his ears. Forget her? He couldn’t fathom how the chancellor could propose something so ludicrous. “But my lord—” he began, determined not to let the matter go.

Darmés only raised a hand to silence him, rising slowly from the sofa. “For now, I am counting on you as military advisor. I’m afraid I have somewhere to be now. You must excuse me.”

Darmés occupied himself with brushing the creases out of his robe, leaving absolutely no room for further discussion on the matter. Felix felt an indistinct sense of unease at his disinterest in Olivia. He was sure that if Gladden and Rosenmarie were here, they would share his feelings, at the very least. *Not that it’s my place to say, but the lord chancellor isn’t taking this nearly seriously enough. It’s not like we don’t know what’s happening... Ought I petition the*

emperor directly? No, that would be a wasted effort. He doesn't respond to anyone but the lord chancellor as of late...

Knowing even as he said it that he struggled in vain, Felix urged Darmés to carefully consider the matter. Clearly finding him tiresome, the chancellor only said, "I will attend to it in due course." His eyes were fixed on the great bookcase of ebony wood.

III

Northern Perscilla, Twelfth City of the United City-States of Sutherland

The Twelfth City of Northern Perscilla, which shared a border with the Kingdom of Fernest, counted amongst its inhabitants many of the copper-skinned peoples who came over from the continent to the east. Of all the cities in Sutherland, it was known for its beauty, stemming from its seamless union of the natural and the man-made. Standing serenely on the city's northern rim was Es Ludo Palace, the symbol of Northern Perscilla.

Es Ludo Palace was made up of three structures; an independent tower where Lady Cassandra resided, a hexagonal building where matters of governance and official events were conducted, and a rectangular building atop the great bridge spanning the Curie River that flowed around the palace. The palace was decorated in deep blue and white, and renowned amongst the thirteen cities for its matchless beauty.

The Chapel at Es Ludo Palace

The lavish splendor of the interior of the palace was more than the equal of its magnificent exterior. In such a setting, the wooden chapel seemed entirely out of place. Eight statues of demons lined both walls, their faces all twisted in rage, and they clutched great axes in their hands as if to cow any visitors. From the great censer that rested on the plinth in the center of the space there rose a thin cloud of purple smoke that carried a sweet and alluring aroma. There were no windows; instead, braziers placed at even intervals along the walls cast red light over the room.

"Her Majesty Cassandra is waiting. This way, if you please..." the lady-in-

waiting said as she led a giant of a man wearing the pelt of a unicorn draped over his left shoulder into the room. He was Drake sum Gorgon, and he held the rank of first aurion gravis of Northern Perscilla.

The hierarchy of the army of Northern Perscilla differed substantially from that of other nations. The lowest rank was normarion, followed by petrion, argerion petrus, aurion petrus, ferrion, argerion, aurion, argerion gravis, and finally, aurion gravis. Ranks starting from argerion had five grades of seniority, so even amongst soldiers of the same rank there was a significant gap between the first and the fifth grade. All this was to say that Drake held the highest possible combined rank and grade, placing him at the very top of Northern Perscilla's army.

I suppose it's too much to hope that she'll be open to my advice... he thought as he approached the throne and the figure of Lady Cassandra came into clear relief. She had glossy black hair that fell to her waist and smooth, copper-colored skin, and she was garbed in many layers of sheer robes in vibrant shades of red and purple. Neither the bewitching aura she projected nor the false smile on her face was anything out of the ordinary. Drake reached the throne and knelt, bowing his head low.

Scowling imperiously down at him, Cassandra snapped, "What is it today?"

"My lady. I come before you today regarding the invasion of the Kingdom of Fernest."

"Oh. The details of the date of the invasion are set, you know."

"Yes, about that, my lady..." Drake said hesitantly. "I think that perhaps we should delay the invasion."

There was a pause before Cassandra demanded, "Why?" So icy was her voice that Drake felt the chill down to his bones and involuntarily looked up. Cassandra's smile was in place as always. But with his long years of experience, it only took Drake a moment to perceive the fury that now simmered just below the surface. It would be a confounding nuisance if her mood soured any further. Drake chose his next words carefully.

"Because we have learnt that the Royal Army has turned the tables on the empire."

“On the *empire*?” Cassandra said. “That’s a poor jest.” For the first time she let her mask fall, leaving no trace of human warmth there.

“I speak not in jest, my lady. We sent out scouts to Fernest in preparation for the invasion. This should make everything clear, if I may trouble you to peruse it.”

He produced a scroll and passed it to the lady-in-waiting who stood beside him. Stooping, she nimbly mounted the dais and held it out with deference to Cassandra, who deftly loosened the string and let it unroll. A long pause followed. Kindling crackled as Drake waited with bated breath for what she would say next.

At last, Cassandra rolled the scroll back up. Then, to his dismay, she ordered the lady-in-waiting to throw it into the brazier.

“Wh-What?!” Drake exclaimed. Frantic to stop her, he began to rise but before he went any further the lady-in-waiting casually tossed the scroll into the flames. Drake stared at the blackening paper, aghast. A cool voice floated over to him.

“Aurion Gravis Drake, is this triviality why you called me here? I am the ruler of Northern Perscilla. I do not have time to waste on such things.” She sounded entirely bored. Drake couldn’t immediately find the words to argue. The smoldering ashes that had once been a scroll held an account of the defeats of the Crimson and Helios Knights. It was a mere whim of Cassandra’s that had first given rise to the idea of invading Fernest. Drake had reluctantly acquiesced, but only because back then he was so bloated with pride that he had believed Fernest could not stand against the empire. Not only that, he had also neglected to gather intelligence. He would have to ensure that he did not err so again.

If Fernest was making a counterattack, Drake thought the best course of action was to wait and see how it developed. There wasn’t a lick of sense in risking running headlong into the flames themselves.

“Your Majesty, you read in the scroll of the defeats of the empire’s elite forces, the Crimson Knights and the Helios Knights. The Royal Army was in tatters. How they managed to mount an offensive I do not know, but right now

they are like a rat in a corner. We would be better off leaving them alone.”

“The Royal Army, a rat? Bold words, Drake,” said Cassandra, tittering as she took out a fan and spread it open. It was too extraordinary for Drake to bear, and before he could stop himself, he burst out in harsh protest. Cassandra’s manner changed at once. She fixed him with a chilly glare.

“You are so very tiresome...” she said. “Though yes, one might reach that conclusion.”

“What other conclusion is there to reach?”

Cassandra snapped the fan shut again. “This is what I think,” she said. “These Crimson and Helios Knights may have put on quite a show of ferocity, but when put to the test, they were revealed to be all bark and no bite. If that’s what they’re using for comparison when they laud the Azure Knights as the empire’s most elite, I hardly think we need expect much.”

“It’s too early to jump to such a conclusion,” Drake protested. “Ferneest is the fearsome Land of Lions—only the empire could have brought them to this point. Please, I beg you to reconsider.” He bowed his head low.

With a loud, pointed sigh, Cassandra said, “I understand.”

“You do?!”

“Oh yes, I understand *very* well. You, Aurion Gravis Drake, are nothing but a coward, and therefore useless to me. I’m amazed you even obtained that rank. Calling yourself a warrior when you’re afraid to fight!”

Drake was about to protest that he was *not* afraid to fight, but before he could open his mouth, Cassandra ordered the lady-in-waiting to send for Arthur. The woman bowed, then swiftly exited the chapel. *Arthur...?!* Drake thought in horror, picturing the man’s insolent smirk. Argerion Gravis Arthur, twenty-seven years old, was a stalwart of the Northern Perscilla army. He was a great commander despite his youth, both learned and courageous, but more than anything, he was a man of ambition. He might well have risen to aurion gravis already if Drake, sensing in him a kind of danger, had not held him back at argerion gravis.

“Your Majesty, I bring Lord Arthur.” The lady-in-waiting returned to the

chapel with Arthur beside her. At Cassandra's summons, he approached the throne before dropping gallantly to one knee. Drake found the theatricality of the display repulsive, but judging from Cassandra's delighted nod, it was having the desired effect.

"Your Majesty," Arthur announced, "I, Arthur mao Finn, have hastened here as you bid me."

"You have my thanks. I trust you know why I called you here?"

"I do, Your Majesty!" Arthur replied without hesitation. "You may leave it all to me. I shall conquer the Kingdom of Fernest and offer up its domains to Your Majesty." It lasted no more than a fraction of a second, but Drake didn't miss the slight tilt of the head as Arthur shot a mocking glance his way.

"Your words fill me with confidence, just as a warrior should," Cassandra said. "*Someone* would do well to take note." Her eyes slid over to Drake.

"There is no stopping you then?" he said at length.

"Not that nonsense again. Even if the Royal Army has gone on the offensive, they will still be nursing their share of losses. And if the imperial army is retreating, so much the better."

"But—"

"Enough. Aurion Gravis Drake, for the time being, I decree that you be confined to your residence," Cassandra announced. "Now, Argerion Gravis Arthur. Let me know when things are ready, won't you?"

"As Your Majesty commands," he replied. Cassandra rose from her throne then passed between the two kneeling men and swept from the chapel, her lady-in-waiting in tow. Drake heard her talking excitedly from behind him in a voice that revealed no trace of doubt that Northern Perscilla would emerge victorious.

They remained there in silence until all trace of Cassandra's presence had vanished from the chapel, then Arthur stood up and made to leave. Drake called after him to wait and he turned with an air of insolence.

"What?"

“You must have seen the scout’s reports. Why are you letting Lady Cassandra do this?”

“Why? Her Majesty desires this war, and so I comply. It really is that simple.”

“Even if the result of this myopic fancy brings ruin down on Northern Perscilla?” Drake demanded. They only had to win. But trouble would come if they lost. Buoyed by victory, Fernest could well mount a counterinvasion.

But Arthur met his fears with a sneering laugh. “Aurion Gravis Drake,” he replied, “Her Majesty relieved you of your duties. I wish to hear no more from you on the matter. You see, *I* am now the commander leading the invasion of Fernest.”

Drake sighed. “If that’s how it is, I see I have no choice. I will at least take the liberty of observing from a safe distance.”

“I think that would be best. After all, the queen so graciously granted you a leave of absence. You should take this opportunity to rest. Now that you’ve shown yourself a coward, Aurion Gravis, I shall win this victory in your stead.”

“You wretch,” Drake gritted out. “Are you mocking me?” His fingers brushed the hilt of the crescent blade at his belt. He was within striking distance of Arthur, but the other man showed no sign of alarm. On the contrary, he raised his hands, looking amused.

“Mocking you? Me, mock the *great* Aurion Gravis Drake? The very idea! My words were no more than a plain statement of fact,” he said. “Now, are you going to draw that or not?” When Drake didn’t reply, he said, “Yes, that’s probably wise,” and strode away, laughing raucously.

Drake watched him go, his clenched fists shaking. There was a loud *crack* as a log in the braziers emitted a great shower of sparks. Drake felt his gaze drawn up to the demon statues standing along the wall. *Do you mock me as a coward too?* he demanded of them silently. Perhaps it was a trick of the flickering light from the braziers. He couldn’t help but imagine he saw the great stone demons smile.

La Chaim Palace in Elsphere, the Holy Land of Mekia

“The Seraph is come!”

The guard’s cry rang out as the great doors engraved with the likeness of the Goddess Strecia swung grandly open to reveal Sofitia Hell Mekia, clothed in pale lilac to match her hair with her silver staff in one hand. She walked gracefully by the assembled guards.

It was the Spring Flower Moon, and the scent of new leaves floated on the breeze. After receiving an official declaration of war from the Principality of Stonia, Sofitia had given the order that a war council was to be held at La Chaim Palace.

They gathered in the Cloudy Chamber, the great meeting room in the palace: Blessed Wing Lara Mira Crystal, Senior Thousand-Wing Johann Strider, Thousand-Wing Amelia Stolast, and Senior Hundred-Wing Zephyr Ballschmiede. These four were joined by a group of twelve ingenious and honorable senior hundred-wings, commonly referred to as the Twelve Angels, to give a council of sixteen. They all stood up and saluted as Sofitia made her entrance. An attendant drew out a chair for her and she sat down, then ordered the others to be seated.

“As you are all aware, the Holy Land of Mekia has received a declaration of war from the Principality of Stonia,” Sofitia said. “I, of course, mean to fight back.” Everyone present nodded attentively. One of the hundred-wings raised a hand, seeking permission to speak. With a slight inclination of the head, Sofitia gave it.

“My Seraph, it’s common knowledge that Stonia is the Asvelt Empire’s dog. There can be no doubt that the empire is pulling the strings from the shadows.”

“Quite right. The empire must have deduced that Mekia was behind the surprise attack on Fort Astora. Stonia has no history with us. They would never otherwise declare war like this without warning.”

There was also the possibility that Stonia was after Mekia’s abundant mineral resources. But Sofitia dismissed this. She’d expected the truth to come out after a little longer, but in the end, it was better to openly name the empire.

The other senior hundred-wings began to chime in with their own questions.

“But this doesn’t make sense. Why doesn’t the empire come for us directly?”

“Good point. The empire doesn’t show mercy to those who defy it. Setting Stonia on us is a damnably convoluted move.”

“The imperials just suffered a series of defeats to the Royal Army. They might have too much else to deal with.”



“I see your point, but unlike the Royal Army, the empire still has some latitude. It’s hard to believe it.”

They made pertinent points, one and all, and anyone with eyes could see the difference in strength between the imperial army and Mekia’s own forces. All the same, a number of reasons occurred to Sofitia for why the empire hadn’t directly initiated hostilities. Of course, the Crimson and Helios Knights symbolized the empire itself. The empire wanting to see how all the other nations reacted to the defeats of both armies would be one reason.

Sofitia said, “I expect they are wary of the Holy Illuminatus Church.”

Mekia was home to the Artemiana Cathedral, the founding institution of the church, but more than just that, there were a large number of churches within the empire itself. To the faithful, Mekia was literally their holy land, and a poorly judged invasion risked incurring their animosity. Sofitia had in fact received a missive from Bishop Krishna Halbert intimating that he would be more than willing to lend her the services of the Knights of the Sanctuary. If there was an insurrection amongst the faithful and then the Knights of the Sanctuary marched on top of that, even the empire couldn’t escape that unscathed. Knowing this, they were trying to take the measure of Mekia’s forces while maintaining the pretense that they were uninvolved. Sofitia explained all this to the council.

Lara, looking grim, crossed her arms. “That’s devious, even for the empire.”

“Be that as it may, it is the correct strategy. Though my heart does go out to Stonia, as they will pay the price for it.”

The owls’ investigations had produced estimates for Stonia’s forces of around sixty thousand soldiers. If it were a simple question of numbers, this would have put Mekia at an overwhelming disadvantage, but not one of those seated in the chamber showed any dismay. If anything, the faces Sofitia saw were bright with exhilaration. None among them doubted that they would win, and as Sofitia looked around at them all she felt her heart swell with satisfaction.

“My Seraph, how many of our soldiers will you mobilize?” Amelia asked in a flat monotone. Sofitia smiled at her.

“I wish I could send the whole army, but on this occasion, I think thirty thousand will do,” she replied. There was a moment of silence, followed by a not inconsiderable stir amongst the senior hundred-wings.

“So half as many as our foe...” Amelia gave a little toss of her hair, then said, “That’ll be easy.”

Lara, who usually searched for anything to rebuke the other girl for, agreed. “Amelia is right,” she said.

“This battle will be an opportunity to demonstrate our strength to the empire. That we win with fewer soldiers is a precondition.”

Achieve victory with an inferior force. It was a simple enough thing to say in words, but the real thing would not go so smoothly. Excluding those victories snatched through unconventional schemes, examples in history of nations that won despite having a disadvantage in numbers were vanishingly rare. The Seventh Legion’s victory against the Crimson Knights had been one such unconventional scheme. But Mekia had Lara, who was an army unto herself, Johann, and Amelia—all of them talented mages. Meanwhile, Stonia might have had the advantage of numbers, but its army would be taking the battlefield under duress. Morale made the difference between winning and losing, and theirs would be nonexistent.

They would see victory. Of that, Sofitia had no doubts.

“Understood, my Seraph,” Lara said. “By the way, who do you mean to send as commander?”

It was sweet, the anxiety that swam in her eyes as she looked across. Sofitia couldn’t help but smile.

“Fear not,” she replied. “This will be our first great battle since the title of seraph passed to me, and there is no one I would entrust the task to but you, Lara, commander in chief of the Winged Crusaders.”

At once, Lara’s expression brightened. Sofitia had on occasion been privy to the delicate smile that lit up her face, but not so Lara’s subordinates. Every one of them wore expressions of astonishment. Amelia usually didn’t allow her emotions to show on her face, but now even she was staring at Lara in slack-

jawed amazement. Lara, faced with all these curious eyes, cleared her throat several times to cover her embarrassment. Then, assuming a deliberately stiff expression, she said, “Very well. I, Lara Mira Crystal, shall take thirty thousand winged crusaders and crush the Stonian army. My Seraph, you may rest easy here in La Chaim Palace knowing that I shall return to you with glad tidings.”

“Then that is just what I shall do,” Sofitia replied, smiling again. “Thank you, Lara.”

“Of course, my Seraph!”

“If I may ask one thing, my Seraph?” came another voice. Sofitia looked and saw Johann looking grave. It was such a contrast from the flippant Johann she knew so well that she drew herself up and gave him her full attention.

“You may ask as much as you like,” she replied.

“That takes care of the question of the Principality of Stonia...” he began, “But what of Death God Olivia—how do you mean to deal with her? I would be grateful for your thoughts.”

The moment Johann said the words “Death God Olivia,” a shadow fell over the atmosphere of exhilaration. Like clockwork, every face turned grave, for no other reason than that every one of them had read the report that Johann had submitted on Death God Olivia.

“This ‘magic’...” Amelia said, cutting in before Sofitia could reply. “Does it really exist? Not to mention, this ‘magical essence’ that allows one to draw mana from beyond oneself. You can’t seriously believe that rubbish.” She looked at Johann with incredulity, and from the identical expression on Lara’s face, Sofitia guessed that she harbored the same doubts as Amelia.

Zephyr appeared compelled to speak, but at a look from Johann, he swallowed his words.

“Yes, dear Amelia, I understand why you would think so,” Johann said. “I saw magic with my own eyes. It still feels like a dream, truth be told. But let me be clear on one point. Making an enemy of that girl would mean certain catastrophe.”

Right away, Zephyr nodded his agreement with Johann’s assertion. Johann

could coolly analyze any situation; the same hardly needed to be said of Zephyr, who commanded the owls. With these two both sounding the alarm against this Death God Olivia, Sofitia could not reasonably set the issue aside.

Upon receipt of Johann's report, she had issued orders to her officials to thoroughly investigate anything to do with magic. But no matter how many dusty tomes they cracked open, they had not found a single mention of the word.

"I appreciate well the danger posed by our little death god," Sofitia told Johann. "But from what you told me, she appears to be friendly towards us." No other conclusion accounted for how Johann had returned home in one piece, not after what he had told her about Olivia's devastating skill in battle.

Johann rubbed his chin, going back through his memories. "I can't say for certain..." he said at last, "but I don't believe she was hostile, at least."

"In that case, rushing into things will do us no good," Sofitia replied. "Let us wait and see." She reflected that she had been right in sending Johann to investigate. If it had been Amelia, she might have lost a precious mage. She was quite sure that it was his temperament that had saved his life.

She then said, "The point that interests me more is the one who taught the little death god how to use magic—this person called Z. You didn't hear anything else other than what was in the report?"

"I don't—I need some time..."

"Whether they are male or female, for instance. Any such insignificant details will do."

Johann scratched his cheek, looking discomfited. "I'm sorry, my Seraph, but I'm afraid, given the circumstances, I was not at liberty to question her further."

"The same goes for me," Zephyr added, hanging his head in shame. "I am a disgrace as leader of the owls."

"Just so that there is no misunderstanding, I am not blaming either of you," Sofitia reassured them. "You carried out your mission at the time to my satisfaction and brought back information of great worth."

In truth, she did wish they had probed deeper. More than Olivia, the existence of this individual known as Z was far too valuable to ignore—easily as valuable, and she saw no exaggeration in saying so, as a whole nation. On the other hand, she agreed with Johann that, given their situation, coveting so much would be ruinous. Magic seemed to be a level above magecraft, but according to Johann’s report, its users died just like mages if they exhausted their mana. This led her to believe that the two powers might stem from the same source, and if that were true, the possibility existed that Lara and the other mages might be able to learn to use magic. For that purpose, Sofitia concluded, she needed to make contact with Z, and her first step towards that goal was to cultivate a friendship with Death God Olivia.

“We are not to interfere with Death God Olivia, then?” Lara said, summing up the discussion.

Sofitia nodded. “Yes. Right now, all our energies should be focused on the battle with Stonia. In addition, although I have not yet informed any of you of this, I have already laid some of the groundwork regarding our little death god.”

“Groundwork, already...?” Lara said, looking reverentially at Sofitia. “You are prescient as always, my Seraph.” Sofitia smiled back at her. The Invincible General was probably worrying over her sudden letter even as they spoke.

There was a pause, then Johann said, “Forgive my impertinence, but what sort of groundwork, exactly?” His eyes were wary. In fact, everyone at the table was looking at her with rapt interest.

Sofitia chuckled. “That,” she said, “is a surprise for later.” She beat her staff on the ground, setting its rings clinking, signaling to them all that the council was at an end.

Interlude: Ellis's Capriccio

The Southern Quarter of Fis

Grimoire Avenue was famous in the southern quarter for its many flourishing businesses. All eyes on the street were particularly drawn to two beautiful women walking along it. One of this pair, with the look of one who had obtained all earthly happiness, was Ellis Crawford. The other, her nose constantly twitching as she caught whiffs of grilled meat from the shop stalls, was Olivia Valedstorm.

"We have such nice weather today, Olivia. It's a *beautiful* day," Ellis said. "Perfect for going out, isn't it?"

"Yeah," Olivia agreed. "By the way, Ellis, where are you taking me?" Beside her, Ellis hummed a tune, in high spirits. Unlike her, Olivia wasn't in military uniform, but an ebony set of armor. She wasn't going into battle—it had been Ellis's express request.

"That's still a secret," Ellis replied. She looked Olivia over from head to toe, drinking her in, then chuckled to herself. Seeing that Ellis had no intention of enlightening her, Olivia pointed at one of the shops that lined the street.

"Okay," she said, "how about we go in here then?"

Ellis came to a halt, her brow creasing ever so slightly. "That run-down old shop?"

The building's faded orange, triangular roof set it apart. Its sign, upon which was written *Refrain Chelles*, listed precariously to the right, giving the strong impression that it might come crashing down at any moment. The first time Olivia had laid eyes upon it, she'd had the same reaction as Ellis.

"Yep. Ashton told me about this place. This is a delicious cake shop, a local secret. The cake they served at the celebration banquet was really good, but the cake at this place is a notch above even that. Unbelievable, right?"

"Is this the shop you talked about the other day?" Ellis asked.

“Right, yeah. That’s the one.”

“Wow...” Ellis said, gazing up at the shop sign. “So this is the place...”

It had been half a month since, at Olivia’s frequent insistence, Ashton had at last gotten his act together and brought her to this store. The shoddy, run-down look of the interior had made Olivia nervous, and Ashton had looked more nervous still as he surveyed the inside of this shop. But the moment she took a bite of the cake, Olivia’s fears evaporated. Forget teeth-rotting, she’d thought her whole mouth might rot away.

She’d also noted that, when she thanked Ashton again for bringing her, he’d said, *Right? What did I tell you?* with a look of deep relief on his face.

Olivia had made up her mind to go back every day that she was in the capital, but Claudia flatly refused to allow this. Apparently, even delicious cake would become ordinary and lose its magic if she ate it every day. Olivia had taken this opinion to heart, thinking, *I see, so that’s how it works.*

And thus, it was in fact two whole days since Olivia had last come to the shop.

“I *know* you’ll love it too, Ellis, so let’s go,” she insisted, but Ellis was muttering under her breath and made no reply. Olivia strained her ears to make out what Ellis was saying.

“Olivia and cake. Olivia and cake. Olivia and cake. Olivia—” Ellis repeated the same words over and over again.

Feeling a strong sense of danger, Olivia had just begun to slowly put distance between herself and Ellis when suddenly, the other girl ran at her like a yaksha. Olivia was so terrified that a strange squawk escaped her.

“Why are you walking away from me, Olivia?” Ellis asked, cocking her head sweetly to one side and beaming.

“Y-You just looked like you were thinking about something,” Olivia babbled, “so I thought I shouldn’t bother you...”

“Olivia, I don’t know how you could ever think you’d be a bother to me,” Ellis said. “Hell will freeze over before that happens.”

“I-Is that right?” Olivia stammered. “So how about that cake?”

“Terrifically tempting as it is, let’s leave it for now,” Ellis replied.

“O-Okay.” For some reason, Olivia felt relief at Ellis’s refusal—but this only lasted a moment.

“*And that is why!*” Ellis pronounced. “After we’re done with what I have planned, let’s come back to the cake shop! This is a two-stage knockout play!”

Olivia had no idea what that was supposed to mean. The only thing she did know was Ellis was smirking at her, which meant she definitely shouldn’t defy her. She nodded repeatedly. Just now, a yaksha of a different species to Claudia had been born.

“Ahhh, this is going to be a perfect day,” Ellis said.

“I-If you say so, I guess...” Olivia wasn’t sure how to describe how she felt as she watched Ellis fold her arms, a dreamy look on her face. *Humans are even more complicated and mysterious than Z taught me*, she thought. *Looks like I still have a lot to learn*. She pictured Z, book in one hand, matter-of-factly carrying out a lesson.

“Here we are, Olivia,” Ellis said. They’d arrived at their destination. Ellis hurried to open the door, then beckoned Olivia inside.

“You wanted to bring me here?” Olivia asked, puzzled as she looked over the inside of the shop. It was stylishly designed; the sort of place young women liked, with shelves of white wood upon which fashionable clothes were tidily displayed. The shopkeeper claimed that Fourth Princess Sara came in secret herself to shop here. But Ellis didn’t care about that.

“That’s right,” she replied. “But we’re not here to look for just any old clothes for you, Olivia.”

Olivia had a few outfits she wore on rotation on her days off, and all of their original colors had faded beyond recognition. She’d admitted to only having the clothes on her back, but Ellis harbored no desire for Olivia to dress up in pretty clothes. Olivia was already the ultimate work of art. She could dress in rags and still be radiant. Even Aphrodia, goddess of beauty, couldn’t hold a candle to Olivia.

When Olivia puts it on... she thought with glee. As Ellis stood there smirking to herself, a familiar figure came trotting over to her. It was the shopworker she'd spoken to on her last visit.

"Miss Crawford, we've been expecting you. Are you here for your order?"

"That's right. Is it ready?"

"It is. Our excellent artisans poured all their energies into its creation. I believe it will be to your satisfaction, Miss Crawford. I'll bring it out directly, if you would wait here." They wandered away again into the back of the shop.

Ellis had been granted a reward after her superb work as Olivia's body double during the battle on the central front. When she'd declared that she would spare no expense, the shopworker had become remarkably friendly. In next to no time, the worker came back with two boxes under their arms.

"Thank you for waiting. I have your order here." They opened the boxes with a ceremonial air and took out the contents, laying them out carefully on the counter.

One was a white cloak that hung off the left shoulder. That was mainly for ceremonial occasions. The other was a scarlet half cape for use on the battlefield. They were both embroidered with two scythes crossed in the center, a single rose, and a skull—the Valedstorm coat of arms, the veritable embodiment of fear for imperial soldiers.

Olivia looked from one to the other. "Cloaks embroidered with the Valedstorm crest..." she murmured. "Are you giving these to me?"

"Yes, it's a present to celebrate your promotion to major general. Please, take them."

Ellis had heard that the ebony armor Olivia now wore had been a present from Ashton. It showed good taste that was unlike him. She'd had the cloaks made so as not to be outdone.

"Thank you, Ellis!" Olivia said. She was already fixing on the ceremonial cloak with a smile on her face that made Ellis feel like her heart was about to burst out of her chest. Thinking she might swoon with anguish, she frantically gestured to the shopworker to bring a mirror, unable to find her words.

Olivia gave the cloak a swish before the mirror, then did a full turn.

“Well? Do you think it suits me?” she asked.

“It’s perfect...” Ellis breathed. “I think I’m going to get a nosebleed.”

“What? A nosebleed?”

“Olivia, my dearest sister, when people lay eyes upon something so incredibly wonderful, they get nosebleeds.”

“Wow,” Olivia said wonderingly as she nodded. “Humans do that, huh? I never knew.” She pulled a black notebook out of her pocket and started scribbling something in it. Ellis’s eyes met those of the shopkeeper, who quickly looked away.

“I have to show Ashton and Claudia as soon as I get back.”

“They’ll be very impressed, I’m sure of it,” Ellis said. “Now then, let’s head to our next destination.”

“We hope to see you again soon,” the shopworker said, seeing them off with a beaming smile after confirming the contents of the coin purse as the girls set off for Olivia’s favorite cake shop.

An hour passed.

“Ellis?”

“Aah.”

“U-Um...”

“Aah.”

“R-Right.”

Though Olivia looked thoroughly distressed, Ellis was triumphant in her efforts to browbeat the other girl into feeding her cake. A few days later, when Claudia found out about the cloak, Ellis found herself looking into the superior officer’s smiling face as the other girl throttled her, but that was a story for another time.

Chapter Three: Titans Clash!

I

The Plains of Rias

The Plains of Rias lay at the eastern extremity of the Holy Land of Mekia. A broad river ran there against a backdrop of mountains, dividing the plains between east and west. Spring was nearing its height, and the beauty of the plains when all its myriad flowers blossomed was famous, but now, not a trace of them could be seen. The miserable flowers had had their short lives ended, trampled under countless feet for no other reason than that this was where the Winged Crusaders and the Stonian Army, ninety thousand soldiers in all, had met for battle.

In the Stonian command camp, Field Marshal August gibb Lanbenstein stood with his arms folded, wearing an expression of indignation. He was a man of robust stature and strength unmatched by common men.

Back in Tempus Fugit 997, when the empire had unilaterally demanded vassalage from the Principality of Stonia, he was also one who had advocated until the end for unyielding resistance. But Roman, chief amongst the Four Sages, had had his say, and Prince Sylvester had chosen to acquiesce to the empire. August had given in to the empire without a fight.

He spent his days since then cradling a gloom that refused to dissipate. On more than a few of those days, he'd drunk himself senseless in an attempt to forget his depression. Yet now, the royal order had come down from Sylvester that they were marching on the Holy Land of Mekia. *What did I tell you?* he'd thought when the orders arrived, laughing to himself. To avoid war, on the grounds that it would bring ruin to Stonia, they had accepted vassalage, but in the end, war had been forced upon them anyway.

Not only that, their opponent was the holy land for those faithful to the Goddess Strecia.

Even the soldiers could tell that war with the empire from the beginning would have been preferable to this, if their recent behavior was anything to go by.

“—is my read, but what do you think? Am I wrong on anything?” August directed the question at his chief of staff, Major General Cecilia palla Cadio, who stood beside him clad in leaf-green armor as he surveyed the deep purple banners and the army. Cecilia, hailed as the most talented woman the Principality of Stonia had produced since its founding, had pushed her way through the ranks of other accomplished officers to achieve her current position.

“I think your rage is justified, Lord Marshal,” she told him. “Having said that, bringing it up now will do us no good. The die is cast.”

August knew this full well, but he couldn’t stop himself saying it. Not when faced with this idiotic war. But he was the field marshal, and he knew that as such, if he continued to voice his displeasure, it would only do more damage to his soldiers’ already low morale. *It’s times like these the title is a nuisance...* he thought. He forced his dark and murky thoughts down into a corner of his heart, then launched into a rousing speech for his spiritless soldiers.

“—I did think the enemy force would be a lot bigger, though,” he mused. “I heard forty or fifty thousand.”

In reality, there could only be around thirty thousand soldiers out there. It was a long way off the information the empire’s envoy had brought.

“Yes...” Cecilia agreed. “Is it possible that the empire’s estimations were off?” She looked to her right, as she asked this question, at a man in azure armor and cloak. Felix von Sieger, dispatched by the empire as military advisor in the battle against the Holy Land of Mekia, calmly surveyed the battlefield, his arms folded.

“No, I think that unlikely. Their intelligence agents, those ‘shimmers,’ are damn good at their jobs. Not to mention, they sent us the strongest man in the empire,” August said. “Doesn’t look like any more than a pretty boy to me, though,” he added in a mutter.

The ladies of the palace had taken to calling Felix, arguably their enemy, “Lord Azure.” They were beside themselves. More than a few fights had even broken

out over whether one or another had met his eyes or not.

It was decidedly ridiculous, but even August recognized that Felix possessed a rare beauty. His hair was a lustrous black that almost looked blue, and his features were exquisitely proportioned. In his intense azure eyes there was a softness that belied his reputation as the strongest warrior in the empire, as well as a gleam of intelligence. There couldn't be another man who cut such a figure by simply standing there. Even August could see how such a man might set women's hearts aflutter. Even so, when he'd seen the daughter of the prince himself gazing at Felix with starry eyes, it had carried him right past anger into a stupefied state.

"He is quite alarmingly handsome, it's true," Cecilia said. There was a sultry note to her voice. *Not you too*, August lamented privately.

Out loud, he cleared his throat and said admonishingly, "*Major General Cecilia.*"

"E-Excuse me, ser," Cecilia said, recollecting herself. "Anyway, if the empire's estimate was accurate, there's only one possible conclusion." She looked at him uncomfortably and August, cottoning on to what that look signified, furrowed his brow deeply.

"These damned Winged Crusaders aren't taking the Stonian Army seriously?"

"Though I am loath to say it..."

"Well, after we rolled over and wagged our tail for the empire instead of fighting, I suppose they might well think as much." August laughed, but it rang hollow. If he were in his foe's place, he might have arrived at the same conclusion, but even with that in the equation, sending only thirty thousand soldiers was surely taking this confidence too far. Though there was no way of knowing what an enemy commander was thinking, the outcome of a battle corresponded directly to the size of one's force. Accordingly, August was fielding his entire army.

"We have twice as many soldiers as the Winged Crusaders. All paths lead to victory for us..." Cecilia trailed off. Her face was troubled, belying the confidence of her words. August supplied the continuation for her.

“But our soldiers’ morale is effectively nonexistent; thus, even with double their forces, we don’t know how the battle will play out. Is that what you wanted to say, Cecilia?”

She hesitated for a few seconds, then nodded. “Regrettably, yes,” she said. “During the march, a fair few of our soldiers even attempted to desert.”

“Were those soldiers followers of Strecia?”

“Just so, ser. They seemed to be particularly ardent believers.”

August turned his gaze up to the sky, sighing deeply. Deserting in the face of an enemy was punishable by death, no matter the reason. Even an aborted attempt earned the culprit no quarter. It was a testament to the depth of the faith of those soldiers that they still had tried to go through with it despite the known consequences should they fail to escape unnoticed.

“The Goddess Strecia...” he muttered. “A more confounded nuisance I never knew. The only god I need is the inimitable Zorbeth, the god of war.”

Zorbeth was a Stonian god, worshiped in that land since antiquity. He had three eyes and six arms in which he held such weapons as chakrams and a trident. Where Strecia was a goddess of creation, Zorbeth was a savage god who brought wrack and ruin.

“‘Zorbeth, the god of war’?” Cecilia repeated. “It’s been a long time since I heard that name. In fact, I think the last time was when I read *The Founding of Stonia* when I was five.” She sounded cheered by the memory. *The Founding of Stonia* was *not*, as it happened, a book remotely within the cognitive grasp of a five-year-old child. On the contrary, it was the sort of tome perused by scholars of history.

Choosing not to remark upon this, August said instead, “Young people these days aren’t interested in tales of gods. It’s the popularity of Strecia that’s the aberration. You agree, don’t you, Major General Cecilia?”

“Er, yes, ser,” Cecilia agreed, not entirely wholeheartedly.

“Well, that’s neither here nor there. You haven’t executed the deserters yet, have you?”

“Fear not, ser. They are at present merely detained. Military law would have them beheaded on the spot, but I judged our circumstances to be somewhat different.”

Anyone other than Cecilia handling the matter would have meted out immediate punishment. August could not have faulted such a decision; it was, if anything, the natural one. It was precisely this ability of Cecilia’s to think outside the bounds of convention that made August value her so highly.

“You were right. Our victory won’t bring an end to this. The Holy Illuminatus Church won’t let this pass in silence.”

If the church got word that Stonia had executed its followers, it might even declare holy war and dispatch the Knights of the Sanctuary. August had to take great care in how he dealt with the faithful if he was to avoid this. It was thoroughly humiliating, but such was the cold reality for Stonia.

“My lord, the enemy’s vanguard is moving,” said Cecilia. August turned and saw that the enemy army had assumed an arrow-shaped formation. So well-disciplined was the maneuver, it was even beautiful. This was not a trick that could be learnt overnight. *Their standard training must be incredibly strict*, August thought. *And yet...*

“An arrowhead formation against an enemy with twice their numbers? What are they thinking?” Cecilia asked.

“They must be very confident about the battle’s outcome,” August replied. Either that, or they merely didn’t know how real battles were fought. Whichever it was, this was an opportunity they could not squander.

“How do we respond?”

“What’s the saying? ‘Like moths to a flame.’ We lure the fools deep into our ranks, wait for our moment, then immediately surround and destroy them. That should give a bit of a boost to our soldiers’ spirits too.”

“Understood, ser. I’ll make things ready!” barked Cecilia. Her voice echoed across the battlefield.

The Vanguard of the Winged Crusaders

Amongst the thirty thousand Winged Crusaders, Amelia led the vanguard, a unit of seven thousand foot soldiers in light armor. Twirling the ends of her hair around her fingertips, she gazed coolly ahead. In the distance, the sixty-thousand-strong Stonian army stood assembled.

Her guardians had assumed an arrowhead formation and now, in stark contrast to the Stonian soldiers, their faces brimmed with unparalleled excitement. Amongst them was Senior Hundred-Wing Jean Alexia, one of the Twelve Angels who stood guard at the Sixth Gate of La Chaim Palace. Cross spear in hand, he came up behind Amelia, who stood at the front, and saluted.

“Thousand-Wing Amelia, everything is ready,” he announced. “We can commence the attack at any time!”

Taking her time, Amelia drew out a pure white pocket watch. Its cover was rimmed in silver and engraved with the image of the Goddess Strecia. She opened it and checked the time.

“Fifteen minutes to get into formation. That is remarkably slow,” Amelia said flatly. “Have you forgotten that this is this battle whereby the world shall know the majesty of the Seraph?”

Jean gulped audibly. “I beg your forgiveness!”

Amelia looked at him for a moment. “I suppose you may have it, this time.”

“Thank you for your benevolence, ser!”

“But there will not be a next time,” Amelia said, glancing back. “Be sure to remember that.”

Under her piercing gaze, Jean took a step back as though pushed by an invisible force. He quickly regained his composure, however, and barked, “Yes, ser! I won’t forget!”

“One other thing. It is a great honor for a warrior to lead the attack. Make sure they all know that if any of them display cowardice in battle, I will kill them myself.”

“It shall be as you say, Thousand-Wing Amelia!” Jean turned on his heel, then dashed away. Before long, his orders were passed round and with a roar, the

guardians raised their weapons.

“May the blessings of Strecia go with you!” they cried as one. “In the name of the Seraph, victory shall be ours!”

“Then it is time for us to overrun them,” Amelia said. “Now, the revelry begins.” She drew her sword, and then, in exultant tones, gave the order to advance.

II

Whether those people known as mages had ever existed was disputed, but the tales said that many of them had once issued forth from that hermetic country, the Holy Land of Mekia. Though a small nation, there was a time when it had vied for domination of Duvedirica. A veritable deluge of books on this period were put out into the world and found widespread acclaim. One tale that garnered particular popularity amongst women was that of Johann Strider, the handsome young man of whom portraits still remained. He was known for his many love affairs and remained a bachelor throughout his life. It was no wonder, therefore, that in his case, tales of a romantic bent drew greater attention than more typical heroic epics.

Men, on the other hand, favored stories of the irresistibly charismatic and divinely beautiful Seraph Sofitia Hell Mekia, seventh of her line, or else of Lara Mira Crystal, whom archival documents named the Silver Beauty.

Then, there were the tales of uncertain provenance of Amelia Stolast, also known as the Bloodied Maiden, who they said loved nothing more than slaughter. One book even contained a somewhat overwrought passage in which she drained the blood of those she killed before pouring it over herself with a deranged smile. All the books agreed, however, in their depiction of her as an implacably ruthless warrior. This brutality must have appealed to some, for her stories enjoyed avid support from a certain subset of readers...

A few hours after the battle between the Winged Crusaders and the Stonian Army had commenced, the Stonian vanguard attempted a shambolic retreat in total disarray. On the front line, Amelia’s sword flashed as she stabbed a fleeing

Stonian soldier in the back as if she was gouging out his heart.

“Now!” someone cried. Soldiers pressed in on Amelia from both sides. She dropped down low to the ground and slashed in an arc with her sword.

“Gyagh!” Disbelief writ on their faces, the soldiers crumpled. Amelia slowly ran her tongue through the fresh blood that glistened seductively on the edge of her blade.

“Did you think you had a chance?” she said. “Rats like you ought to scurry away as fast as your little legs can take you.”

“Thousand-Wing Amelia, we’ve divided their forces!” cried Jean, waving his bloodied cross spear against the dazzling sun. Amelia glowered at him.

“My own eyes told me that much,” she said. “If you have time for useless chatter, you ought to be crushing their fragmented forces.”

Jean immediately issued orders to each unit, and the guardians swiftly got into position to mount a pursuit. Amelia watched these proceedings, savoring the increasingly potent stench of blood around her, when a guardian appeared before her, gasping for breath.

“Th-Thousand-Wing Amelia! I bring urgent news!” When she didn’t reply, they tried again. “Thousand-Wing Amelia!”

“Would you shut up?” Amelia said at length, her eyebrows drawing up towards her temples. “Just when I was in such a good mood.” If they were not on the battlefield, she could have *educated* this guardian on the consequences of spoiling her enjoyment. Unfortunately, they were.

“I’m truly sorry, ser, but we have no time to lose!”

Amelia sighed. “Fine, what is it?” she said.

She looked at the guardian, who for a second looked terrified but then said, “A great enemy host is closing in on us from behind!”

“A great host?” Amelia repeated. “Be specific in your report. How many soldiers?”

“Around twenty thousand.”

“Twenty thousand...” Amelia briefly beckoned to Jean who, as though reading her mind, held out a spyglass. Amelia seized it and pointed it in the direction the guardian had indicated. There, she saw the Stonian Army advancing to surround them. There were around twenty thousand soldiers, just as the guardian had said. *The insolence...* she thought, giving an incensed snort as she thrust the spyglass at Jean. He looked behind them just as she had done and let out a moan that wracked his whole body.

“The timing...” he breathed. “The timing is too perfect. I have an idea, ser, though it is only my own impression.” Jean went on to explain that the enemy’s behavior thus far had all been to lure them deep into the enemy’s ranks. It was a trap. Amelia didn’t bother to respond to this analysis.

“I can’t believe the *Stonian Army* pulled the wool over our eyes,” Jean gritted out. He stabbed his cross spear deep into the ground, his expression bitter. Cries of confusion began to rise up from the guardians who had been pushing forward bravely with the attack.

Amelia had directed her attack at a weak point in the enemy’s defenses, but this, precisely, had been their cunningly baited trap. Amelia had fallen right in without realizing it. It was highly likely that the soldiers now fleeing in confusion had not been made aware of the plan. Though if they *were* all in on it, she had to hand it to them—their acting was even better than hers.

“I suppose we find ourselves with a great noose drawing around us, then,” she muttered. “After they rolled over and licked the empire’s boots, I didn’t think the dogs had the nerve.”

An older soldier lay crumpled at her feet. Now, his finger twitched, and his blood-smeared lips twisted open. Apparently, he was still clinging to life.

“Stubborn old—!” Jean raised his cross spear to impale the old man, but Amelia raised a hand to stop him. “Thousand-Wing Amelia?” he said, bewilderment writ plain on his face.

She wasn’t being merciful. She merely felt an inkling of curiosity as to what the man wanted to say so badly, he had thrown away the chance he might have lived if he had only stayed silent.

“Mekian fools...” he croaked. “You cannot...win...”

"That's what you have to say?!" Jean cried.

"Listen well," the old man went on. "Since ancient times, Zorbeth, the god of war, has watched over Stonia... A poor spirit like your Goddess Strecia... That dross doesn't even reach his feet...and that is why you have no hope of victory." With this, the old man broke into a crazed laugh. Amelia kicked him hard in the head. She felt a dull impact as his neck lolled at an impossible angle and the irritating laughter cut off.

"I know of no god named Zorbeth, nor do I care in the slightest," she said. "The only god is the one and only Goddess Strecia." Again and again, she rammed her boot into the lifeless body of the old soldier. The guardians around her held their breath and watched as the man's face, already ruined past the point where it was identifiable as such, spilled black blood over his pure white armor.

Jean watched this in awe. "Though there is of course no chance that the Winged Crusaders will be defeated," he ventured hesitantly, "if we stay here, we will be cut off from the main force. Please, Thousand-Wing Amelia, you should fall back and leave the vanguard to me." Jean was resolute, but Amelia only spread her arms and assumed an expression of feigned surprise.

"Fall back? Did those words really just come out of the mouth of one of the Twelve Angels?" she asked. "Are you mad?"

"Of course not," Jean replied without a hint of shame. Amelia put her hand to her brow and shook her head.

"Jean Alexia," she sighed, "you ought to exercise your brains sometimes and not just your muscles. If you did so, you'd see the opportunity we've been given."

"Opportunity? Did you say opportunity, ser?"

"I do not repeat myself," said Amelia.

Right now, the Stonian Army would be complacent in the knowledge that their plan had worked. A sharp blow struck now, Amelia predicted, would have a twofold impact on the enemy's morale. After that, it wouldn't matter how many soldiers they had. The rest would be child's play. Falling back in the face

of such a golden opportunity was unthinkable.

Jean was looking at her with disbelief, so Amelia, though it irked her to no end, explained the situation to him. Jean listened without interrupting, but she could see in his face that he wasn't convinced.

"While I understand in theory, ser," he said when she was done, "I must submit that under our current circumstances, it will be nigh impossible to pull off. You just said yourself, Thousand-Wing Amelia, that there is a noose around our vanguard. What lies that way isn't opportunity, but—eh?!"

He cut off as Amelia seized him by the collar and yanked him towards her so that they were eye to eye, her gaze piercing, and his wavering as each stared down their opponent.

"'You just said'?" Amelia sneered. "Did you not understand me? All I said was that the noose was *drawing tight*. Don't go jumping to conclusions."

"B-But if we don't..." Jean's face was rigid, but he didn't back down. Amelia sighed heavily. If words wouldn't persuade him, she would have to make him understand through action. Alas, dispelling the anxieties of her idiot subordinates was part of her duty as commander.

"Get away from there," she said, thrusting Jean away. She focused, pouring a great stream of mana into her mage circle. Its outer rim began to spin, and her left hand was bathed in a growing blue-white glow.

The guardians around her suddenly grew lively.

"Look at Thousand-Wing Amelia's hand!"

"Oh! Thousand-Wing Amelia is going to use magecraft!"

Amelia set her sights on the enemy vanguard, planted her legs apart, then raised her left hand, now blazing with cerulean light, and slammed it into the ground.

"Look closely," she said. "Now the real revels begin."

A beam of light shot out, racing along the ground. When it reached the enemy army, it vanished. In its stead, the earth began to tremble.

"Eh? An earthquake?" The Stonian soldiers stopped. As the tremors grew

more violent, more and more of them fell, unable to stay upright. Then, a startled voice rang out from their ranks.

“Hold on! Something just came out of the ground!” With this, more and more cries of shock rose up.

“V-Vines?!”

“What are these freakish things?! They’re wrapping around me!”

“I-I can’t move!”

Another soldier shrieked “My blood!” they shouted. “The vines, they’re drinking my blood?!”

“...Help...us...”

In moments, the whole of the Stonian vanguard was engulfed in massive vines. It was like an artist’s picture of the torments of hell.

This was high-level binding magecraft: the *Verdantwine Myriad*. It generated vines that coiled around the targets of the spell, then sprouted scores of thorns that drank up their blood. Once all the blood was sucked dry, a profusion of scarlet flowers bloomed from the corpse.

This was the cruelest, the most inhumane, of all the magecraft in Amelia’s arsenal.

III

The Middle Guard of the Winged Crusaders

“Eep? Eep! Eep?! L-Lord Johann, this is terrible! Terrible! The enemy is moving to surround Lady Amelia’s unit! We must go to their aid at once!” Spyglass in one hand, Senior Hundred-Wing Angelica Brenda was practically hysterical. Johann sighed deeply.

“‘We must go to her aid’ is easy enough for you to say,” he replied, “but what do you want to do about the enemies in front of us? You’re not saying we should send reinforcements by retreating from our position?”

Johann’s middle guard had engaged the Stonians not long after Amelia’s

vanguard entered the fray. The battle that unfolded was thrilling, but the stark difference in morale between the two forces was showing, and Johann's force was pressing its advantage.

"I would never say that," Angelica protested.

"Then what do you want me to do?"

"As if you need to ask, ser!" Angelica spread her arms and bounced up and down. "You use your magecraft and go, *kapow!* You blast them to smithereens! *Kapow!*" With every bounce, the weapon strapped to her back gave a dull clang. There was no getting around how disproportionate the thing looked compared to her slight frame. The aggressively crude greatsword had earned her the moniker of "Razor Angelica." She was one of the Twelve Angels and stood guard on the First Gate of La Chaim Palace.

"You make it sound so easy," Johann said, "but even if it were, my magecraft is horribly inefficient. If I were to, as you put it, 'go kapow,' it would drain all my mana in an instant."

"Would draining all your mana be bad?" Angelica asked, cocking her head to one side. Johann stared back at her suspiciously. He remembered telling her something to the effect of *mana drain equals death* in bed.

"Don't play coy with me," he said.

"I'm not being coy, ser," Angelica replied. Her head showed no sign of returning to an upright position.

Am I getting mixed up? Johann thought. For a second, a parade of different women's faces ran through his mind's eye. But now that he thought about it properly, he wouldn't have spoken so openly about the fundamentals of magecraft. In the end, he arrived at the conclusion that it *had* been Angelica.

"Huh," he said, glowering at her. "So, what? Are you telling me to go kill myself?"

Angelica broke into a smile. "Don't be ridiculous. I mean, I don't mind *at all* that you blew off our date to go meet another woman. Not in the slightest!" While Johann gaped, struck dumb for a moment by this unexpected angle of attack, Angelica pressed on, widening her purple eyes and affecting a drawl.

“Oh, you know, *young* and *perky*, with the *silver hair*. I hear she’s just the absolute *prettiest* little thing.” Though she bore a resemblance to an adorable tiny animal, there was unfortunately also a sharp gleam in her eyes like a masterfully honed blade.

There was no doubting now that she was roundly pissed off, but the person she was angry about was so different from what Johann had expected that before he could stop himself, he blurted out, “Oh, that one.”

“*That* one?” Angelica’s eyes narrowed and her smile grew thinner. Sensing he was in danger, Johann hurried to correct himself.

“I didn’t mean anything by that, don’t worry about it,” he said. “Anyway, I didn’t forget about our date, Angelica. I received direct orders from the *Seraph* to go on a recon mission. I couldn’t do anything about it. It just so happened that my target was a beauty.” He took care to emphasize the “just so happened” part. It was the simple truth, with none of the embroidery he was so good at, and he hadn’t done anything to feel ashamed of.

But Angelica pressed her index finger to her cheek and cocked her head to one side again. “Wait, wait. Now, something doesn’t add up here.” She was obviously telling him that she knew something. Johann was gripped by an ominous feeling, but he asked her to continue.

“*Well*,” she drawled, “you see, I heard something. I heard that Lord Johann *volunteered* for the mission himself! And that’s not *all*. He even knew from the beginning that this girl was *incredibly beautiful*.” When Johann didn’t say anything, she asked, elongating her words even more dramatically, “What’s *this*? Why so *quiet*, ser?” Her eyes bored searchingly into his face. Johann made no rebuttal. Or rather, he didn’t have one.

It was true both that he had volunteered, and that he had known of Olivia’s divine beauty beforehand. Any more bad excuses at this stage would be less like poking a hornet’s nest than aggravating a swarm of the class two dangerous beasts, pterowasps. *But why does Angelica know so much?* he thought, alighting on the obvious question. Johann himself would never have let slip anything that could sink any ships, but he couldn’t see Angelica looking into it of her own accord.

Johann was cringing internally as Angelica's eyes glued even more tightly to him when insight struck him like a bolt of lightning. *That's it, I've got it! It was Amelia. If she's the one who squealed on me to Angelica, it all fits. Ugh, she's so nosy.*

Amelia had depressingly few relationships, but for some reason, she occasionally indulged Angelica alone. Just the other day, he'd done a double take when he'd noticed the two of them going into an ornament store. Perhaps Amelia was fond of Angelica's guileless personality. Whatever it was, this was the result.

Johann cleared his throat loudly, assumed a stern expression, and said firmly, "Enough of this. The third company looks like it's faltering."

"Oh! He wriggles out!" Angelica said. She poked his cheek, exasperated, and he swatted her away.

"I'm not wriggling out of anything," he protested.

"Hmph! That's not fair, Johann..." Muttering to herself, she still handed off his orders to the runners with precision, and not long after, the ninth company set off to aid the third.

"Now, are we going to help Lady Amelia or not?" Angelica asked again, now deadly serious once more. Johann saw clearly that she was genuinely worried about Amelia.

"Like I told you, we don't have the soldiers to provide reinforcements," Johann replied. "I know how you feel, but right now, it's impossible."

"Then couldn't we ask Blessed Wing Lara to go for us?"

Rather than answer, Johann reached out and gently stroked her soft white hair. Angelica muttered, "You won't wriggle out like that," but otherwise she let him do it.

"If Amelia is in real danger, Blessed Wing Lara will act without our asking her," Johann told her. "But I wouldn't fret. Amelia wasn't made thousand-wing for nothing."

Of course, Johann didn't have anything solid on which to make that assertion.

The unparalleled might of the inhuman power of magecraft still relied on a human to wield it. Carelessness could easily result in a quick death. But Amelia was too clever to be sitting on her hands right now.

“I suppose that’s true...” Angelica said hesitantly. Her expression was dark, and she kept glancing at him. Johann could tell she wasn’t convinced.

“Think about it,” he told her, “Forget Blessed Wing Lara. You know she’d let me have it later if I tried to help and messed it up. That woman’s ego is enormous.”

“Okay, I can see that...” Angelica admitted with a small laugh. Johann was just observing that it was only Angelica’s familiarity with Amelia’s nature that made her laugh like that when he was struck by a sudden, choking wave. This was no ordinary sensation. Only a mage could have picked up on it. It was a wave of mana. *Well, well, dear Amelia,* he thought. *You went and used that spell.*

Seeing Johann grimace suddenly, Angelica looked puzzled.

“It looks like your worries will have been for naught,” he told her.

“What? How do you know that?”

“I just felt a wave of mana, which means dear Amelia used high-level magecraft.”

“High-level magecraft? What does that mean?” Angelica asked, her eyes sparkling with curiosity. It was easy to see she expected something spectacular, but Johann knew those expectations would be met only with disgust.

“It’s better if you don’t ask,” he told her. “The answer will turn your stomach.”

“Come on. When you say it like that I just *have* to know,” Angelica pouted, puffing up her cheeks and shaking him by the shoulders just like she’d prodded him earlier. He left her to it for a while, but when she showed no sign letting up, he reluctantly took the spyglass from his belt.

“Fine, fine. You can use my spyglass. If you want to know that badly, take a look with your own eyes. Only...”

“Only?” Angelica prompted him.

Looking her right in the eyes, Johann said, “No comments once you’ve looked.”

“Got it! All *right!*” Angelica enthusiastically took Johann’s remodeled spyglass, then, with deftness at odds with the greatsword strapped to her back, she scrambled up a tree. After a little while, she returned, unsteady on her feet. Her eyes were blank and her face pale.

“Bleeegh...” she mumbled. “That was disgusting. The Stonian soldiers were all dry and shriveled.”

“I told you it’d turn your stomach,” Johann said. “The first time I saw it, I reacted just like you are now.”

“What even *was* that? That magecraft?” Angelica asked, puckering her lips in distaste.

“It’s called the *Verdantwine Myriad*. It’s high-level magecraft that sucks the blood out of its victims. Right down to the last drop.”

“Ick. So that’s why the corpses were all shriveled. So those red flowers all around the bodies...”

“You’re quick. I guess you could call the flowers proof of the spell. That’s by far the most vicious of all the magecraft at our dear Amelia’s disposal, by the way.”

“It’s more than vicious enough,” Angelica muttered, then, her eyes turning anxious, she asked, “Do *you* use magecraft like that too, Lord Johann?”

Johann ran his fingers through his hair and said, as much for his own sake as for hers, “I don’t. Or more accurately, I can’t...”

Personality, preferences, and talents all strongly influenced the kind of magecraft a person could wield. Johann remembered his former master telling him as much. *Verdantwine Myriad* was a binding spell that reflected Amelia’s sadistic nature. Johann could never have cast it.

When he told Angelica this, she sighed. “Thank goodness...” she muttered with heartfelt relief.

“Anyway,” Johann continued, “what’s happening out there? I suppose the

tide of the battle has shifted?” Really, enemy or no, Johann would have been thoroughly impressed if they had held on to any fighting spirit after witnessing the *Verdantwine Myriad*. But then, he reminded himself wryly, there was no need to concern himself with them anymore.

“Y-Yes, ser! Lady Amelia’s magecraft has thrown the enemy into disarray. It’s only a matter of time before she goes on the offensive.”

“All right. Well, it’s not like we planned it this way, but it’s about our time as well. Shall we finish this?”

“Oh, now you want to?” Angelica said, looking at Johann’s left hand with exasperation.

“I’m not holding out on you,” he said. “I was just waiting for the right moment.”

“The right moment?”

“Yes, in accordance with the will of the Seraph.”

“Is this that demonstration the Seraph talked about back at the war council?”

“It is exactly that. The empire incited this battle, which means they’ll definitely have someone lurking around to see how it turns out. I’m going to put on a good show for them so they know what happens if they come for us,” Johann finished, flexing his left hand.

With a broad smile, Angelica raised her fist high into the air. “Then let’s thump ’em good! *Wham!*”

Johann sighed deeply and muttered, “Nothing ever gets you down, does it?” Then, he raised his left hand to the sky. As he poured mana into his *Blazelight* mage circle, Angelica gave the order for a temporary retreat.

“Lord Johann! Our forces have withdrawn!” she called.

“Let’s do this then...” he murmured. “I do sympathize with your plight, but this is the way of war. Forgive me.” Scorching light erupted from his hand along with an enormous ball of flame. The ball, like a miniature sun, stopped high in the sky above the Stonian Army, emitting a thunderous rumble.

“Burn!” Johann clenched his fist, and the ball exploded. Flames poured like

rain down on the heads of the Stonian Army.

This was high-level fire magecraft: the Blazered Shower. Its flames clung to the bodies of the soldiers like raindrops, until in the end they became engulfed in a scarlet maelstrom. It was one of the broad area-of-effect spells that Johann favored.

IV

Stonian Army Command

“Lieutenant Colonel Roland is dead!”

“Colonel Reinbach is dead!”

“Major General Eberhard is dead!”

Each runner came in and out, only to be replaced by another reporting the deaths of brave Stonian officers. No fear could have been worse than that which permeated the command camp.

So it came to this, in the end, Felix thought, listening to the shouting around him. *I did anticipate it, to a degree...* Through his spyglass, he saw the Stonian soldiers immobilized by innumerable vines. Turning the glass further to the west, he saw another hellish scene unfold as a downpour of fire rained upon them from the cloudless sky above. This was clear evidence of magecraft, which confirmed the presence of at least two different mages in the Winged Crusaders.

One uses binding magecraft, he thought. *I’d be willing to bet that that’s Amelia Stolast’s work. The other one favors flame-based magecraft. And broad area-of-effect magecraft... The mage in question appears to possess exceptional talent. The Holy Land of Mekia has far exceeded my expectations with the excellence of the players it’s assembled. Minor nation or not, we cannot afford to underestimate them. As much as I feel for the Stonian Army, this information is worth its weight in gold.*

He returned his spyglass to the holster at his belt when, from behind him, he heard the rough thump of stomping footsteps. Turning, Felix saw August storming towards him, his face like thunder.

“Marshal August, is something the matter?” he asked.

“You ask me what the matter is! What in the blazes was that?”

“By ‘that,’ you mean...?”

In response, August rounded on Felix with such ferocity it seemed he might strike him, seizing him in a fierce grip. Felix felt his feet lift very slightly off the ground—no mean feat, even using both hands, given that he was clad in full armor. He was appreciating August’s exceptional strength when he heard Teresa cry out in a furious voice he’d never heard from her before.

“Lord August! Release him at once! Where is your respect for Lord Felix?”

“Blathering wench! You’ll hold your tongue!” he roared back.

“Did you call me a *wench*...?!” Teresa’s face flushed with anger.

Felix, fearing she might fly off the handle, endeavored to keep his voice calm. “Lieutenant Teresa,” he said, “there’s nothing to worry about.”

“But my lord, he—”

“I’m fine,” Felix said, then smiled at her. At last, though she continued to watch him with a face like she wanted to interject further, she nodded begrudgingly.

“Lord August, he *is* a prominent figure in the imperial army,” Cecilia chimed in, requesting that August calm himself. Returning to his senses, he lowered Felix back to the ground looking abashed, then, after clearing his throat a few times, he adjusted his posture and lightly inclined his head to Felix.

“You’ll forgive my disrespect,” he said shortly. “But I’ll ask again—just what was that?”

“I assume by ‘that,’ you are referring to the magecraft?”

“Like you even need to ask. Mages in the Winged Crusaders? Now that’s a nasty shock. You wouldn’t...” He paused, the fury in his eyes morphing into suspicion. “I’m sure you didn’t know that, Felix?” Cecilia stared at him too, a similar, if less intense, look in her eyes.

“Know that there were mages in the Winged Crusaders?” Felix inquired.

“Exactly!” August cried, his voice rising again.

Felix answered casually. “Oh yes, I knew that, of course.”

“You...?! You knew, and concealed it from me?! ”

“That’s right.”

“What the hell?! If we’d known before—”

“If you’d known,” Felix cut him off, “do you really think you could have fought properly? Mages have transcended the bounds of common humans. In the imperial army, at least, we know this. I imagine the Stonian Army is much the same, no?”

“Yes,” August said at length. “Both human and not. They are inhuman changelings.”

“That’s just it. Your soldiers’ morale was already low. The presence of mages could have been a lethal poison in the minds of the Stonian Army. I am confident I made the correct call.”

The people of most countries, not only in the empire, believed that magecraft was the stuff of fairy tales. There were said to have been a fair few of the people called “mages” long ago, but now their numbers were limited. Felix could see where the fairy-tale idea had come from. Anyone in the military would still be aware that mages existed, but those who had seen magecraft with their own eyes would be few and far between, if any. Mages were a rare breed, of this there was no doubt, and this was why they were deified and held in awe.

At last, August said, “All right, I admit you may be right. But why was the soldiers’ morale so low in the first place, eh?” His voice grew heated, and his fists trembled. That he wasn’t reaching for Felix’s collar again was probably in part his self-restraint at work, but Felix thought Cecilia’s sharp gaze on him was the greatest factor.

“Respectfully,” Felix said, choosing words he thought would needle August, “I believe it’s the duty of the marshal of the Stonian Army to make do despite such things. However you arrived at it, the final decision to fight was yours, after all.”

August grunted with suppressed fury.

“You seem to know a fair amount about these mages, Felix,” Cecilia remarked.

“Indeed, Cecilia, I believe myself to be fairly well-informed where mages are concerned,” Felix acknowledged. “I’ve had the opportunity to know a somewhat eccentric mage.”

“Is that right...?” Cecilia said. “I’m afraid I only have a passing familiarity with mages myself. I wonder if I might trouble you to share a little of that knowledge with me?” She bowed low, her golden hair falling over her shoulders.

“You don’t have to grovel to *him*, Major General,” August said waspishly.

“My lord, our plan succeeded for but a moment before magecraft tore through it like a knife through butter. Our entire army is on the verge of collapse. This is not the time to get hung up on trivialities.” Having thus reprimanded August, Cecilia once more appealed to Felix.

“Please, Cecilia, stand up,” Felix said. “Of course I’ll tell you. At this point, there is nothing more valuable than information.”

With this, he faced the two of them and began to explain.

“Very well. I see now,” Cecilia said. “So there are limitations to godlike powers; they come with a price.”

Summarizing Felix’s explanation, mages could be said to possess three main qualities.

One: when a mage used magecraft, it would always stem from the mage circle in their left hand.

Two: casting a spell took time commensurate with its power.

Three: mana, the source of the mages’ power, was not only limited, but a double-edged sword that, if exhausted, would cause the mage’s instant death.

Taking all this into account, Cecilia arrived at the conclusion that, while the threat of the mages remained unchanged, it was not impossible to counter.

“Just so,” Felix said when she proposed it. “Mages might have powers beyond ordinary humans, but they are not invincible. Cut them with a sword, and they will bleed. Wound them severely enough, and you can kill them. Take away their magecraft, and they are no different from an ordinary human. You have plenty of options.”

So strong was Felix’s assurance that Cecilia had to suppress a sardonic smile. There was plenty in what he said that she could agree with, but she also thought it was only the strongest man in the empire could speak so. Without any plan, she didn’t think for a second that an ordinary soldier had any chance. She observed him, finding not a shadow of trepidation in his noble bearing. *I think... No, I’m certain that he’s crossed swords with a mage before. And here he is, alive. He must have something to match the mages...* Cecilia concluded, then turned back to August, who looked just as peeved as before.

“Let’s order an immediate retreat, my lord,” she said. “By analyzing what Felix has told us, we can plan a number of ways to combat the mages, but we don’t have enough time right now.”

“Huh,” Felix said approvingly. August, meanwhile, glared daggers at her, his shoulders quivering.

“You think...you think we should tamely withdraw?” he gritted out. He might not have wanted this battle, but the rage in his face illustrated well that his warrior’s pride would not permit him to retreat.

Knowing what lay in August’s heart of hearts, Cecilia gave an emphatic nod. “Regrettably, yes,” she said. “The soldiers’ morale may as well be nonexistent at this point. Even with a force twice as great as our enemy’s, it will not be nearly enough. It won’t make any difference.”

“But if we retreat,” August said slowly, looking at Felix with resentment burning in his eyes, “that won’t satisfy the empire.”

“We shall have their satisfaction,” Cecilia retorted. “We have put nearly all our forces into this battle. If we are crushed here, the Principality of Stonia will be finished. One day, it shall cease to appear on any map of Duvedirica. I cannot believe that this is the wish of the empire at this time.”

Though they were nothing more than rumors, she had heard that the

Kingdom of Fernest was beginning to make a comeback. And if that were true, Stonia surely still had utility to the empire as a shield. This was Cecilia's assessment as she folded her arms and turned back to Felix, who was listening quietly. "Does that work for you, Felix?" she asked.

Felix scratched his face with a slender finger. His lips quirked slightly as he said, "The two of you appear to be laboring under a misapprehension."

"Whatever might that be?"

"I am only here as a military advisor. My role here is to offer advice, not to supply my opinion on the decisions of the Stonian Army."

"You say that now, after *you* set this off?" August said forcefully.

"Well, I don't deny that," Felix admitted. "But if you are going to retreat, you ought to hurry. I think it may become nearly impossible if you let this chance pass you by."

"Felix is right, my lord," Cecilia said. "The Winged Crusaders are gathering momentum. Please, order the retreat."

At this second entreaty, August's fist, until now tightly clenched, loosened, and he heaved a deep sigh.

"Give the order for all forces to retreat," he said.

"At once, ser!"

Command of the Winged Crusaders

"There is news, ser. A red beacon was fired from what we believe is the location of the Stonian command. The Stonian soldiers responded by falling back en masse."

With its sturdy exterior and streamlined silhouette, the massive, six-wheeled chariot shone silver. Lara was atop it, observing the progress of the battle, when the runner came with their news. She rose slowly from her ornate chair, and said, "So the Stonian Army has begun its retreat..." She might have been talking to herself, but someone responded.

"Looks like Lady Amelia and Lord Johann's magecraft got results," said a

sleepy voice. It came from a woman standing off to one side of the chariot. Beside her a brilliantly white horse waited sedately. The woman, who had pale purple hair the same color as the Seraph's, was named Historia von Stampede. No one would have guessed it from her tousled hair and indolent expression, but she was the angel who guarded the Twelfth Gate—the final gate in La Chaim Palace. She was also not only Lara's right hand, but her irreplaceable friend.

"Can't you compose yourself a little more, Historia? There's a battle going on."

"I'm afraid that's impossible, ser. I can't resist my physiological needs." Blinking her half-open eyelids, Historia yawned widely a few times, looking totally relaxed. Lara could only shake her head in disbelief.

"I swear..." she muttered. "You are still the leader of the Twelve Angels. How can you set an example for the guardians like this?"

"Well, it's not like I *wanted* to be leader," Historia said with a huff, putting her hands on her hips. Before she opened her mouth, a muscle began twitching in Lara's cheek.

"Well, well..." she said. "Are you dissatisfied with the decree of our blessed Seraph, Historia?"

"There! There, you said it! You *really* love the Seraph, don't you, Lara?" Historia said, gloating. Lara felt her ears getting very hot very fast. The guardians nearby were giving them curious looks, so she cowed them with her own forceful stare.

"Everyone is watching. Don't be so familiar when we're in public," Lara scolded.

"Yes, ser. I'm very sorry," Historia replied breezily. "Now, what's our next move? Personally, I feel like if they want to retreat, it's like, be my guest. It's so much easier that way." Looking out at the battle unfolding in the distance, Historia yawned lazily.

Lara let out a snort. "Don't be an idiot. We're pursuing them, that's out of the question. They trespassed on Mekia's sacred soil, and puppet of the empire

they may be, but I will see them pay for it.”

“Yeah, you *would* say that, Lara. I knew you would,” Historia said. She glanced at Lara then sighed extravagantly.

“I *told* you not to be so familiar.”

“Yes, ser. Understood, ser.”

“You only need to say it once, Twin Blade Historia.”

At once, Historia’s gaze turned sharp. “Hey, could you cut it out with that absolutely *mortifying* name?”

Lara smiled blithely back at her.

The House of Stampede was known of old as a family excelling in the literary arts, but since Historia had taken up the blade as effortlessly as she used her own arms and legs from the time she was a child, there was no shortage of those who now mistook them for a family of warriors. Her talent was such that, in a pure contest of swordplay, even Lara couldn’t match her.

“But Angelica and the others seemed pleased with their epithets,” Lara remarked.

“Excuse me?! Do *not* lump me in with that perpetual airhead!”

“Then behave yourself.”

Historia sighed. “*Fine*,” she said. Hooking her left foot in the stirrups, she swung up deftly onto the white horse, then drew her sword, holding it high aloft. Her earlier sleepiness was all gone now; she was like a different person, beautiful and yet gallant. The eyes of all the guardians were drawn inexorably to her.

“Hear me, my beloved guardians!” she cried. “Thanks to your efforts, our victory is all but assured! But we are not finished yet! In their folly, the Stonian Army dared to challenge the Holy Land of Mekia—now, they will face our holy wrath! With this, we prove our fealty to the Seraph!”

There was a roar of assent from the guardians. Historia turned back to Lara. “Blessed Wing Lara, we await your order.”

Lara's left hand swung up and she declared, "Commence the attack." At her words, the four black horses whinnied, and the chariot tore away across the battlefield. At the same time, a battle cry rose up from the thirteen thousand guardians, and they began to advance.

Scarcely half a day had passed since battle had commenced between the Winged Crusaders and the Stonian Army, yet already, it was nearing its conclusion...

V

The Stonian Army began its retreat under relentless pursuit by the Winged Crusaders. Somehow, August and Cecilia managed to maintain order through their leadership...

"I think it's about time we went in for the kill," Amelia said. She'd gone so far as to place a spell of insanity on the Stonian soldiers before releasing them. No sooner had they returned to their comrades than they underwent a rapid change and, roaring like beasts, they threw themselves upon everyone around them.

And that wasn't all.

"It appears Blessed Wing Lara is joining the fray. Well, the course of the battle is already decided, but let's not get careless."

Angelica swung her bloodied sword with joyful exhilaration at the head of Johann's guardians as they cut through rows of Stonian soldiers. Occasionally, Johann's magecraft flashed out and produced another pile of blackened corpses.

"—Major General Cecilia! We can't shake off the pursuers any longer!" screamed a Stonian officer from amidst the blood and chaos of the battlefield.

"Before you come wailing, concentrate on letting more soldiers escape!" Cecilia castigated them, but internally, she was absolutely frantic.

If this goes on... she thought. Someone...someone has to slow them down.

For a moment, the faces of her family flashed across her mind. To shake this

image off, she went to August to strongly recommend that she herself lead the rear guard to delay their pursuers.

“How old are you?” he asked.

“What?” Cecilia replied, thrown by the sudden question.

“I’m asking you how old you are.”

“I’m twenty-four...” she muttered.

August ran a bloodstained hand along the edge of his helmet. “Twenty-four...” he murmured. “Too young to die yet.”

It only took Cecilia a moment to comprehend the meaning of his words. “Ser, the marshal has never led the rear guard, not in any age or nation!” she cried. “I am the natural choice to undertake it!”

“I won’t allow it. I don’t know what value to put on yourself, Major General, but your life is worth more than throwing it away in this pointless battle, at least. For the future of the Principality of Stonia.”

“The same goes for you, my lord!”

They couldn’t lose Field Marshal August here. Even if they pulled off the retreat, she could well imagine the chaos that would follow. With the followers of the Goddess Strecia to consider on top of this, there could be no doubt that the Principality of Stonia would face an even harder road than before.

August’s face was troubled. Cecilia glared at him.

“There’s no need to look so grim,” he said. “It’s a waste of a pretty face.”

“Don’t think you can get out of this with that rubbish!” she retorted fiercely. The corners of August’s eyes crinkled, then his face quickly grew hard.

“Listen to me,” he said. “I am the marshal in command of the Stonian Army. No matter what happens, I will have to take responsibility for our defeat. I cannot allow Prince Sylvester to bear the blame.”

“Y-Yes, that’s true, but...”

“Besides, Felix was right. In the end, it was Stonia that decided to fight this battle. Yes, there were mages among our enemies, but the imperial army isn’t

going to let that fly as an excuse. You know that very well, Cecilia. And in that case, it's on the battlefield, like a warrior to the end that..." August broke off before he reached the final, decisive word, letting out a hearty laugh. Cecilia was struck dumb. She had never seen the man so full of fighting spirit until this battle.

"Certainly, Major General Cecilia is far too young," came a voice from behind her. "You dying before the rest of us would be a giant nuisance. As such, those of us aged and not long for this world shall accompany the lord marshal."

She turned and saw a group of elderly officers and soldiers standing proudly in a line. It was strangely beautiful.

August stared at the old soldiers, then sighed deeply. "Don't get any funny ideas," he said sharply. "You hurry home and dandle your grandchildren on your knees, you old codgers."

But the soldiers, without a word, only stepped forwards. Their faces, etched deep with the lines of long years, wore fearless smiles.

"What a bunch of absolute lunatics! You don't need me to tell you that only hell awaits us on this road. You'll never step on Stonian soil again in life."

"Miserable bastard! Never thought I'd hear anything so gutless from the marshal's mouth! Have you forgotten all the battlefields we've come through together? The outcome of this battle isn't decided yet!" Lieutenant Colonel Bacchus was an old veteran officer. He held a glaive that looked about three times as long as he was tall, and now he beat it hard on the ground. As if this was their cue, other courageous voices rose up to join Bacchus's.

"Lieutenant Colonel Bacchus is right. Who're the Winged Crusaders?! We'll show this Mekian riffraff what the Stonian Army is made of!"

"Zorbeth, the God of War, is with us always!"

"My friends..." August looked from face to face of these soldiers all long past their prime, his gaze unrelenting. Then, his fierce smile from before spread once more across his face.

"All right then. I see you've made up your minds. It's no use arguing. You'd better not get in my way, at least."

The soldiers raised their weapons high and let out a battle cry. August watched them, deeply moved. Then, at last, he turned back to Cecilia.

“That is where we stand,” he told her. “I will lead these brave, battle-hardened warriors against the Winged Crusaders. I leave everything else to you, Major General Cecilia.” He paused for a moment, then said, “I’m counting on you.”

“Understood, ser,” Cecilia replied at length. “I wish you all triumph.” With that, she saluted. To say anything further would only cheapen the moment. She was a woman as much as a soldier. She knew how to send off a resolute man with good grace.

August nodded in satisfaction, then looked at Felix, who stood beside him.

“Well, you heard me. You just told us it was our decision to make, Felix. No complaints from you, eh?” His tone was plenty harsh, but Felix expressed neither support nor opposition. Without a word, he held out his right hand. August’s eyes widened a fraction, but then he slowly reached out, and the two men shook hands.

“I know I’m in no position to ask this of you at this hour, but please, help as many soldiers to withdraw as you can.” August bowed his head low. There was a ripple of astonishment from the officers.

Teresa, who stood behind Felix, muttered, “At this hour indeed,” shaking her head.

Felix lay a soft hand on August’s shoulder. “Look at me, August. I do not know how much help I may be, but I will do everything in my power.”

“My lord! You are far too good!” Teresa exclaimed, unable to restrain herself any further as she forcibly inserted herself between the two men. Felix looked at her gravely.

“Field Marshal August has gone so far as to bow his head to me to beg my help. It is not in me to turn aside the request of such a man.”

“But ser!”

“Lieutenant Teresa, this matter is decided.”

Teresa's mouth twisted, but finally, she let out a heavy sigh of resignation.

August had just stated his gratitude when one of the female officers cried in a voice close to a scream.

"Lord August! Another group is approaching!"

Cecilia immediately pointed her spyglass towards the oncoming enemy and saw a unit flying resplendent banners. Her eyes were drawn above all to a vehicle that raced along at the head of their ranks. At first glance, it looked something like a large carriage with the roof removed, but it was plated with layers of heavy shielding, and installed on each side was a large-scale mechanism like a bow mounted on a platform. It was drawn by four black horses clad in magnificent armor. All this made it very clear that this was no ordinary vehicle.

It's strange, to be sure, but it's beautifully made. I bet it's the enemy commander sitting up there. Which means they're bringing out their real force at last... Cecilia bit her lip.

"My lord, in all likelihood, this is the enemy's main force. They mean to bring this to an end in one blow."

August grinned indomitably. "Outstanding," he said. "Saves us the time of hunting them down. This is just the chance I wanted to kill their commander." August issued swift orders, assembling a new unit with the old soldiers at its core. Then, shouting bravely, the five thousand soldiers charged out towards the enemy force with the force of an oncoming storm.

Cecilia watched them go, a multitude of emotions clamoring within her.

Then, Felix said, "I'm going to take my soldiers and attack the mage using fire. While I draw their attention, please, Cecilia, retreat with all haste."

"Are..." Cecilia said haltingly, "Are you sure about this?" Felix had made a promise to August, but he had no real obligation or responsibility here. She wouldn't have wondered if he'd only said it as a means to placate August. Teresa had said he was too good, and if Cecilia were in her position, she probably would have thought the same. But Felix only nodded resolutely to show it was fine.

“I suspected it’d come to this, knowing Lord Felix,” said a large man cheerfully. He stood next to Teresa, who still looked mutinous, and was presumably the captain of Felix’s personal guard. Behind him waited his soldiers, every one of them in gorgeous azure armor. Their fighting spirit poured off them and their eyes burned with unyielding confidence.

“Felix, and all of you Azure Knights,” Cecilia said, “I, Cecilia palla Cadio, thank you. I have no words to express my gratitude.”

There was only one thing Cecilia could do now. She bowed—simply bowed her head low.

“Lord Johann! Lord Johann! A unit of knights in blue armor is charging our left flank!” called Angelica. Her greatsword was stained bright red and her teeth flashed white.

“Did you say blue armor?” Johann looked left. There, sure enough, his eyes found a unit of soldiers in uniform blue armor hewing their way through his guardians. He had no recollection of being coddled in his training as a guardian in the glorious Winged Crusaders, yet they were being dominated by barely five hundred of the soldiers in blue.

“I suppose they must be the Azure Knights,” he said at length.

“The Azure Knights? Like from the empire?”

“That’s the one. But I have to say, I’m surprised to see them *here*. This could get a tad messy.”

Among them, one soldier on the front line stood out head and shoulders above the rest in his finesse with his blade. He appeared to be their captain. Angelica must have felt it too, because she whirled her greatsword in a few wide circles above her head, making it whistle like a chill winter wind. She was eager to enter the fray.

“That man with the black hair at the front, the one who stands out from the others. He looks *really* strong. It’s all right with you if I go fight him, right?” Angelica said, baring her teeth in a savage smile. It was rare to see her wear such a smile on the battlefield, the fact of which alone was enough to show that

this was an opponent of consequence.

Reining in Angelica, who was chomping at the bit, Johann observed the man with a careful eye. Then, he cast Adamantine Wind on himself. This was magecraft that would enhance his strength. Pale scarlet light softly enveloped his body, and Angelica's eyes went wide.

"Lord Johann?"

"He's for me to handle. Angelica, you fall back so I don't bring you down with me."

"Come *on*, don't worry about me. Let me at him, ser, please!" Angelica turned as if to go straight to the man, so Johann took her firmly by the shoulder. She turned, and he could see the disappointment clear in her eyes.

"Can you not hear me?" he asked.

"Ser, I just *told* you I'll be fine. My sword's going to rust away."

"I can't lose you here," Johann replied. "Now stop arguing and leave this to me."

Angelica huffed and puffed up her cheeks like a frog, but finally, she said, "Yes, ser."

As he mollified her, Johann returned to following the man's movements. He seemed to flow like water, graceful as a dancer. Johann had encountered someone who fought like that before.

Oh yes, I recognize that, he thought.

The man seemed to sense Johann's gaze. He flicked the gore from his blade to the ground, then started walking serenely towards Johann.

It wasn't long before the two of them stood facing one another, keeping their distance.

The man—who even Johann noted was very good-looking—spoke first. "Are you the mage in command of this unit?"

"Dear me, now that I see you up close, you are *dashingly* handsome. I suppose you break all the ladies' hearts?"

The man's brow creased. "I would like you to answer my question."

Johann gave an exaggerated shrug. The man clearly wasn't inclined to chat. *In that case*, he thought, frowning himself. "I believe it's considered good manners to give your own name when you ask a question," he pointed out. "I wouldn't have believed that, just because we were born into different lands, our standards of courtesy should be so at odds. Is this common practice in the Asvelt Empire?"

The man's deep azure eyes widened a fraction. "How very perceptive of you to recognize me as being from the empire," he said. Johann smirked.

"I'd be more shocked if I hadn't worked it out when I saw that armor," he said, pointing at the blue plate.

The man grimaced, then quickly straightened and said, "You will excuse me. I am Imperial General Felix von Sieger."

Johann felt a growl brewing in his throat. Felix von Sieger was the commander of the Azure Knights and the strongest man in the imperial army. It was he who had so easily gotten the better of Amelia, a *mage*, in the battle at Fort Astora. He was probably here to keep an eye on the Stonian Army. Johann had to admit he hadn't expected to find such a prominent figure joining the battle.

"I am Senior Thousand-Wing Johann Strider of the Winged Crusaders," Johann replied, "and as you guessed, I am a mage." He held out his left hand and, in lieu of further salutations, loosed a fireball at Felix. It roared across the distance between them, but Felix didn't try to get out of the way. Instead, he swung his sword that he had held raised above his head straight down. There was a blast of wind and the fireball dissipated before it reached its target.

"No...!" Johann heard Angelica gasp behind him.

"You deflected a fireball with just the wind off your blade..." Johann said. "My instincts were correct, it seems. Are you another monster of the same breed as that girl, then?"

"As that girl...?" Felix echoed, staring at Johann in surprise. "Do you know Olivia Valedstorm, by any chance?"

"Oh, well enough to break bread together, shall we say," Johann replied with

a suggestive smile. He raised his rapier with the divine words of Strecia engraved along the blade. It was a peerless weapon, bestowed upon him by Sofitia for this battle.

“I see,” Felix said at length. “It appears there is much more I must ask you about.” And with that, he thrust his sword out once more.

VI

Get in first.

Johann struck first. He ran at Felix, who held his sword pointed directly at Johann. Enhanced by Adamantine Wind, he could run as fast as a tempest and strike like levin. But Felix showed no sign of alarm. Instead, he stepped forwards as if to offer himself up to Johann’s blade.

“Agh...!” Johann was suddenly seized by the sensation that a great wall had sprung up before him, blocking his way. In a split second, he dug his feet into the ground then dove to one side just as, with a howling roar of wind, Felix’s blade slashed down where he’d been standing.

He hasn’t used magecraft to strengthen himself, yet the speed with which he swings that sword... He’s going to be one hell of an opponent, though I suppose I knew that from the start. This isn’t the time to be stingy with mana.

Felix held out his sword again, perfectly composed, while Johann recognized that, once again, he was up against a monster. In truth, he felt a kind of force coming off of Felix that was almost identical to what he had felt when he’d fought against Olivia. He was gripped by a sudden intense curiosity as to the outcome of a battle between himself and Olivia, then caught himself. *Right now, focus on your own battle.* He raised his left hand straight up, then released four balls of blue fire. Each slowly morphed into the shape of a bird, before coming to hover around Johann at his front, back, and sides.

“Birds clad in flames...?” Felix said under his breath, looking dubiously at the little birds.

“Don’t think I’m going to attack you with them,” Johann told him. “They’re a precautionary measure. Just in case.” He kicked off the ground and ran at Felix

again, materializing a fireball even greater than the first in the palm of his hand. This time, he released it at the ground in front of him. Roiling flames reared up on impact. The moment he confirmed that Felix's field of vision was obscured, Johann leapt, spinning through the air to land behind Felix. He was in his opponent's blind spot. He had the overwhelming advantage. But Felix was still no ordinary opponent. He thrust his blade at the man's back with breathtaking speed, but before it hit, Felix vanished from before Johann's eyes. In the same instant, he heard the bird behind him let out a piercing cry. Johann spun around, his blade flashing. Sparks exploded.

"I thought you'd move like Olivia," he remarked. "Good thing I took precautions." Felix's face colored with astonishment. A grating sound came from their swords as the blades dug into each other. If he had been an ordinary swordsman, Johann felt sure that this one blow would have dropped him before he'd even had time to react. He understood how Amelia had mistaken Felix for a mage. He could have been badly hurt if he hadn't known what she'd told him.

When he'd fought Olivia himself, her seemingly instantaneous movement had kept him at her mercy for the duration of the battle. If he hadn't cast the tracing spell Flare, he wouldn't have been able to immediately counter.

That battle really was worthwhile. I'll have to thank Olivia... Though to her, it probably felt like brushing aside a frisky kitten. He saw her innocent smile in his mind's eye.

He exchanged a few more blows with Felix; then both of them drew back to a safe distance to observe the other. Johann kept his eyes on Felix and didn't lower his blade. Felix looked at him with intent interest.

"Just now, you said that I moved like Olivia, did you not?" he asked.

"I suppose I did," Johann said, after a pause.

"Do you mean she is able to use Swift Step like me?"



“Oh, so it’s called Swift Step, is it? I see. What an apt name,” Johann said, making his admiration apparent.

“I would appreciate it if you’d answer the question,” Felix said, exasperated.

“It looked the same to my eyes, at least.”

“Indeed...” Felix looked like he was considering something. Then, he slowly returned his sword to its scabbard.

Did he get cold feet?

As if in mockery of this thought that flicked across Johann’s mind, Felix took a great step forward, then lowered himself down and leaned forwards slightly. The azure of his eyes grew even more intense, and his breathing came shallow with the occasional deep exhale. He had shifted from motion to stillness. His aura was in all respects different from before.

What’s he doing? Johann thought. In response to this change within Felix, he immediately cast Adamantine Wind. Scarlet light wrapped around him once more as his every bone and sinew gave off a grating noise, almost like a scream.

Ugh... You really feel the strain the second time. But I know he’s plotting something. It’s vital that I make a preemptive blow before he can try anything.

He exhaled deeply to distract from the pain throughout his body, then filled his lungs with air and, releasing the power built up in his legs, kicked hard away from the ground. He’d enhanced his body to its limits, and all of his five senses—sight, sound, touch, taste, and smell—were sharpened to the utmost extreme.

It was one of those senses—sight—that perceived the slight opening of Felix’s mouth and another—sound—that picked up his whispered words.

“Ultimate Swift Step.”

There was a dramatic *crack* like something splitting apart, and Felix vanished. All that remained was a large, circular depression in the ground.

He disappeared?! Are you serious?! Johann’s eyes right now could perceive all phenomena. This wasn’t like his confrontation with Olivia. Yet, even with these eyes, he had lost sight of Felix. Just as panic seized him, he felt an impact in his

right side, along with pain. Thrown off to one side, Johann found himself looking at Felix, right fist outstretched and surrounded by a churning cloud of dirt. A few seconds later, the little birds, flying above Johann where he lay on the ground, seemed to remember their job, and began to chirp the alarm.

Johann chuckled to himself. *I never thought he'd be too fast for Flare to detect him. What a marvel.* He sprang up and was on his feet in a moment, brushing the mud off of his uniform. Despite the dramatic fashion in which he'd been sent flying, he hadn't sustained much damage. Adamantine Wind strengthened his body's resistance to blows, but he thought it more likely that Felix had not put his full strength into the strike. Johann suspected that Felix, wanting to question him for everything he knew about Olivia, had unconsciously pulled his punch.

"Do you want to keep going?" Felix asked.

"Of course."

"You do..." Felix said thoughtfully. "The thing is, it would appear my task here is complete, so if you would only be so kind as to tell me what you know of Olivia Valedstorm, we could leave it there." He spared a glance over at where the Azure Knights were battling, then immediately looked back at Johann, who guessed from his words that his object had been to delay them. By pinning down Johann's middle guard, the Azure Knights had given more than ample reprieve to the Stonian Army so that they might withdraw. There was truth to their reputation as the most elite in all the imperial army, then.

"So Olivia is proving a bad headache even for the empire, I suppose," he said.

"Yes. I couldn't deny that even if I wanted to," Felix admitted at length. "If not for her, this war with the Kingdom of Fernest would likely already be over." Putting his hands on his hips, he gave a twisted smile. What he said was no exaggeration—Johann thought the same. If, hypothetically, there were no Olivia, the Holy Land of Mekia might now be engaged in all-out war with the Asvelt Empire. Such was the weight of the influence Olivia exerted upon her surroundings, and so thus did she shine brighter and more dazzling than any star.

"Well, first of all, no ordinary fighter is going to stop her. You've got some

monstrous power in you too, but I expect even then, you'll have a hell of a time with her."

"I am aware of that, of course. That's why I want to know more about her."

"Yes, I'm sure you do, but I hope you don't think *I'm* going to blurt it out to an enemy. If you want to change sides, I'll tell you whatever you like," he added with a grin.

Felix responded by sighing heavily. Then, he put his hand on his sword and began to draw it once more, muttering, "I should have known there was no chance. I just so hate relying on brute force."

"That sounds like you think there *is* a chance with brute force," Johann said. "Just so you know, I won't crack, even under torture." Johann had risked his life for the precious knowledge he had acquired about Olivia. How much the empire knew about her at this time, he didn't know, but he was sure they didn't know about magic. That alone was a secret worth more than a mountain of gold, and he had neither reason nor obligation to share it readily.

"I know that," Felix said. "Though we have not known one another long, I think I have a grasp of your character. But it is possible to draw the information I want from you regardless of whether you will it."

"Regardless of whether I will it? You're not really saying that's possible...?!" Despite himself, Johann goggled at Felix. Compelling a person to speak against their will should have been utterly impossible, but it might not be for another mage. But Amelia had made it clear in her testimony that Felix was not a mage.

As Johann struggled to fathom Felix's true meaning, the other man said, "The Holy Land of Mekia does not have a patent on mages. The empire, naturally, has its own. I admit she is a little eccentric, to be sure..." He grimaced. Johann remembered belatedly that Amelia's report had touched on the matter of the empire's mage, and he privately cursed his own carelessness.

From how he's talking, this mage definitely sounds like she has an unorthodox style, he thought. Broadly speaking, mages were divided into four styles. Johann and Amelia were war-style mages. Then there were support-style mages, who imbued weapons and tools with magecraft. Mages like Lara, who used both war-and support-style magecraft, were generalist-style, and the rest were

unorthodox-style. Mages were further broken down into various branches by their personalities and ways of thinking, like Johann with his flame magecraft, and Amelia with her binding magecraft. Unorthodox-style mages were not only rare among the already scanty number of mages, but much about them was still unknown. Judging not only from Felix's words, but his character, Johann was utterly convinced that he was not a man who blustered.

"Well, that's a complication," he said.

"In that case, would you be open to reconsidering?" Felix asked as he ran at Johann again.

"Like I said, if you change sides, I'll tell you whatever you want," Johann said, reiterating his invitation through the earsplitting screech of metal and the shower of sparks. "The Seraph would welcome a man of your caliber with open arms. And you can be sure you'll get a position to match the one you have now."

It was not just through high-quality ore and sophisticated stoneworking techniques that the Holy Land of Mekia had built its prosperity. Another key factor was Sofitia's willingness to appoint anyone with talent to a high-ranking position, regardless of social standing. Even Angelica, who guarded the First Gate of La Chaim Palace, had begun her life in an orphanage. When it came to the man they heralded as the strongest in the empire, Johann had no doubt Sofitia would treat him handsomely. But Felix's eyes didn't waver for a second. Instead, they began to burn with fury.

"I pledged my undying loyalty to the emperor," he replied. "I would die before I turned traitor. The same is true for you, is it not?"

Johann snorted. "You're not wrong. You'll see me dead before you see me betray the Seraph. But then, we both live by our blades, in the end. It was clear from the start we were never going to resolve this through words."

"Let us resolve it then," Felix said. They both smiled fearlessly as their blades clashed, then they rebounded, putting distance between them once more. Johann immediately directed his mana into his mage circle until, when his left hand blazed white-hot, he swept it down. All around them, flames erupted out of the ground to surround Felix.

“This...isn’t ordinary fire,” Felix said quietly as he looked over the serpentine coils of flame. His imperturbable composure reminded Johann of Olivia.

“Very good,” Johann commended him. “You’ll have plenty of time to verify its effects in the next world.” He clenched his fist, and the ring of fire began to tighten. Felix sheathed his sword and lowered his weight as he had before. At first glance, it looked like Ultimate Swift Step. But unlike before, he had his right hand on the hilt of his sword.

Olivia used magic to repel the Blazelight Vortex. But he can’t use magecraft, let alone magic. Even if he used Swift Step, the flames of the vortex will still turn him to ash the moment he touches them. You could go so far as to say he’s in check. But then why do I feel all this unease bubbling up from the pit of my stomach?

After he’d been so careless with Olivia, Johann was determined not to make the same mistake twice. He kept a close eye on Felix’s movements when a piercing voice rang out in his ears.

“Glorious Asura Whirlwind!” Felix drew his sword fast as light, and from the blade came forth a raging wind like a tornado. The flames surrounding him were swept up and away by the spiral of air, until at last, they scattered in the sky over their heads.

What the hell... As Johann stared in slack-jawed horror, Felix’s face was cool.

“I assume that was what you were keeping in reserve,” he remarked. Behind his words, Johann could hear him asking, *Are you finished yet?*

The bastard’s right that the Blazelight Vortex was my last resort. And he just brushed it off... He is truly a monster, Johann thought, even as he pushed his own body to its breaking point with Adamantine Wind. He also accepted that he was never going to beat Felix like this.

All right, what’s the plan then? I could cast Adamantine Wind again—never mind, that would definitely kill me. He went through posing the question to himself as much to calm his nerves as anything else. His body would start to break down if he pushed it any further. Magecraft might have been divine power, but those who wielded it were in the end only frail humans. No matter how hard he trained, his body had its natural limit. Unable to work out his next

move, Johann raised his rapier.

“I will not allow you to torment my Johann!” His eyes found Angelica, yelling in fury as she made for Felix.

“Angelica, stop! This isn’t an enemy you can beat!”

“But—!” Angelica whirled around, beginning a bitter retort, but then, a look of joy spread over her face.

“Dear me, a senior thousand-wing in such distress.” He heard another voice behind him, this one mocking. In the same instant, a multitude of thick vines burst out of the ground in front of Felix. He was unperturbed, backing away as he briskly sliced up all the vines that reached for him.

Johann turned and saw Amelia. Sword in one hand, she came over to him, sweeping back her pale blue hair. Behind her he saw Jean Alexia of the Twelve Angels and the vanguard with its banners bearing a bloody sword.

“Amelia, Amelia!” Angelica ran at Amelia at top speed and threw her arms enthusiastically around the other woman. Amelia pulled her off with a long-suffering air.

“We’re on the battlefield. Address me properly,” she said, then continued in a different tone, “We meet again, it seems. Your presence is a great honor, even if it comes unexpectedly.” Amelia smiled heartlessly at Felix. Felix’s face became harsh.

“Amelia Stolast...” he replied. “I have unfinished business with you after Fort Astora, but fighting two mages really doesn’t sound like a pleasant time.” Vines assaulted him from all directions, but he cut them all away. Looking from Johann to Amelia, he let out a deep sigh.

“In that case, you may retreat, if you like,” Amelia said.

“How unexpected. You’ll let me go?”

“I will. Killing you wasn’t on my agenda for this battle. I shall bestow death upon you at the proper time and place. So please, enjoy what brief time you have left.” Amelia spread her arms to him as her smile grew crueler still. Despite her perpetual air of mockery, you could rely on her at times like this, Johann

thought.

“I shall take you up on that, then,” Felix said at length. “I confess I’m disappointed that I couldn’t hear more about Olivia Valedstorm, but this has been fruitful enough.” He turned on his heel and strode away. He was so totally open to attack from behind that Johann considered it for a moment, but he didn’t act on it in the end. So long as they were on the battlefield, he wouldn’t have thought it cowardice, but it offended his sense of aesthetics.

And even attacking him from behind would probably be a wasted effort... he thought.

Not long after, the Azure Knights followed their commander in an orderly retreat.

Johann exhaled with relief. “Honestly, dear Amelia, I’d be toast without you. Things were just going from bad to worse, you know. My mana is almost exhausted too.” He sat down heavily on the ground right there, filling his lungs with fresh air, then exhaling deeply. Partly due to the incredible strain he’d put on his own body, he wouldn’t be moving far for a while.

Amelia looked down at him smugly, then put a hand on his back. “You owe me one,” she said.

“Amelia, that was the *coolest* thing ever!”

“This girl...” Amelia stared peevishly at Angelica as the other girl entwined their arms together then bounced up and down, laughing giddily.

That smile really does suit Angelica, Johann thought as a smile of relief broke out across his own face. “All right, then,” he said. “I suppose we leave the rest up to Blessed Wing Lara, then.”

“Quite. When victory is ours, there’s no need for us to intrude any further.”

With that, the two of them looked out to where the main force came marching on.

VII

With Amelia’s intercession, the battle between Johann and Felix came to a

conclusion for the present. August's rear guard, meanwhile, fought tooth and nail against Lara and the main force of the Winged Crusaders. So furious was the conflict, they say, that minstrels would sing of it for years to come.

Bacchus roared with laughter. "Mekian upstarts!" he cried. "You think you'll strike me down like that?" He brandished his glaive, Kidomaru, with reckless abandon, holding back the Winged Crusaders. All who stood against him met their end either run through or hacked to pieces by his blade. His movements seemed to give the lie to his aged exterior, displaying the mastery that is the sole inheritance of those who undertake long years of disciplined training.

"Senile old man! Skewer him, all of you, all at once!"

In response to the ten-wing's order, five guardians all thrust their spears at Bacchus. He twisted artfully and evaded their many attacks, but his foot caught on a fallen corpse, and he was thrown off-balance. For a moment he let his guard fall, and it was then that a guardian came up behind him in his blind spot to strike him in the back.

"Nngh...!" Bacchus came to a standstill.

"Now!" the ten-wing bellowed. The guardians seized the chance to stab him with their spears. Black blood poured unchecked from Bacchus's body.

"He's dead!" cried a guardian, a smile spreading across their face. But this lasted for only a moment.

"You...You won't kill me!" Bacchus, still on his feet, bared his bloodied teeth and grinned at the guardians. They could only stare in shock, nearly forgetting that they had stabbed him through the back. On the battlefield, losing one's nerve was akin to a death sentence. Bacchus took his glaive and, one by one, cleaved through the lives laid bare before him.

"The old man can't die!" cried another guardian. Unable to believe their eyes, they took one step back from him, then another, terror in their eyes. Bacchus spun his glaive above his head with a manic laugh, then began to beat the shaft of his weapon on the ground.

"See that?" he cackled. "Here at my back is Zorbeth, the God of War! Even

now, he lends me his power! He speaks to me and tells me I have nothing to fear from any who grovels before the likes of Strecia!”

“How *dare* you speak ill of Strecia, you miserable wretch!” Spittle flew from the mouth of an especially devout hundred-wing as he bellowed, face distorted with fury. “Keep wagging that tongue of yours! I care not! Archers, shoot now and put this walking corpse out of his misery!”

At his command, his soldiers loosed a volley of arrows, and Bacchus, his lips still twisted in a dreadful, soul-chilling grin, breathed his last.

The runner came just as August broke the tip of his blade cutting down his twentieth guardian.

“Lord August, Lieutenant Bacchus is dead, along with his entire unit.” The man made his report matter-of-factly, despite the numerous arrows buried deep in his back, from which scarlet blood even now continued to weep, bathing him in crimson. Anyone could see he was mortally wounded.

“How did he meet it?” August asked.

“He was truly magnificent. He refused to give a single step.” The runner nodded deeply to August, his face full of pride.

“I see...” August murmured. “You did well to tell me this. Now rest, and leave the rest to us.”

“You are very kind, ser. I will take you at your word...” With this, the runner quietly crumpled. His chest rose and fell with barely perceptible motion, then fell still. Thus another brave soul met a worthy death.

“Until we meet again in the next world,” August said. He threw aside his broken blade, instead taking up the fallen sword left behind by the man he had just killed. The man must have been of some standing, for the blade was of good make and sat well in his hand.

“I’ve got plenty left in me yet...” he said under his breath. The same manic grin Bacchus had worn spread across his face.

Almost two hours had passed since the battle began between the main force of the Winged Crusaders under Lara's command and August's rear guard. The Stonian Army now fought like berserkers, not batting an eye even when an ally fighting beside them was killed. They did not give way and they did not look back. They only pressed forwards, killing the enemies before them. There was no strategy or tactics in this. They were like mindless beasts. Yet not only could they not stop the Winged Crusader's advance, despite their best efforts, their forward march was met with an immovable wall that pushed them further and further back.

They're like a wall of death. No half-hearted assault is going to break through that. Ahh, just when I thought this was going to wrap up easily... Her eyes slid to where her friend of these fifteen years stood firm beside her, observing the progress of the battle. There was a shadow over her elegant features, though it was so faint that none but Historia would have noticed it.

And Lara doesn't look like she's going anywhere... Historia thought. *Nothing for it, then.* With an inward sigh, she freed her right foot from her stirrup and leapt from the back of the white horse.

"You're going?" Lara asked. In response, Historia drew her weapons from her belt. The twin blades were curved like crescent moons and glittered silvery blue. Named Azulune, the paired blades were shorter than those of standard swords to accommodate Historia's extreme close-range fighting style. The weapon was a masterpiece into which Mekia's preeminent smith, Dagan Asylum, had poured his blood, sweat and tears.

"What else am I supposed to do? We're going to sustain more losses than we can brush off if this keeps up. Unless you want to crush them to death with your magecraft, Lara? I mean, that'd be the fastest route."

Even a wall of death would crumble into dust in moments if Lara turned her magecraft on it. It would be the surest and safest way to do it, and best of all, it'd be easy.

But the woman herself only huffed through her nose and said dismissively, "Don't be silly. This is still a valuable opportunity, even with this pack of fools

who must surrender to madness in order to fight. Giving them a quick end with magecraft would defeat the purpose of the whole exercise.”

“There’s a valuable opportunity?” Historia asked. Lara smiled thinly and nodded.

“It is rare for the guardians to get the chance to put down such an opponent. This is an opportunity to further improve the Winged Crusaders.”

“A rare opportunity, huh...?” Historia said thoughtfully. “Yeah, you *would* say that, Lara.”

Lara’s goal was clear and concise. She planned to turn the Winged Crusaders into the greatest army on the continent of Duvedirica. There was no doubt that she wished this for Sofitia’s sake, and Historia knew full well that opposition was futile.

Still, it’s a bit over the top. I think Lara’s being a bit too demanding. I mean, the empire has the Azure Knights...

Feeling a smattering of sympathy for the guardians Lara was pushing to meet her ideals, Historia twirled Azulune’s twin blades a few times by way of warming up her muscles.

“I haven’t seen you work in a while. I’ll be watching closely,” Lara said, the corners of her mouth twitching.

Historia heaved a dramatic sigh. “You seem to be confused—I’m a sword fighter, not a street performer. Must be nice getting to be so carefree as commander in chief.”

“You know it’s only because I trust you that I spoke so?” Lara said this like it was obvious, but Historia felt a shiver go up her spine. Lara rarely praised anyone. It made her bashful, even if they were friends. She hurried to regain her composure.

“Yeah, yeah. It’s all in how you say it!”

“Insubordinate as usual, Twin Blade Historia,” Lara said, throwing that hateful name at her again. The man driving the chariot couldn’t hold back a snort of laughter.

Glaring past him at Lara, Historia shouted, “I keep *telling* you! Don’t use that name!” Then, she took off at a dash towards the oncoming wall of death.

Amongst the roar of voices and clamor of the battlefield, one old soldier noticed Historia. A smile spread across his face as he slashed across with his swordstaff at her. She dodged, dropping so low that her body brushed along the ground, then slipped right in close to him.

“So long.”

In a flash, she swapped her sword to her right hand and severed the old man’s carotid artery. A geyser of blood erupted from him as he collapsed, but Historia had already forgotten him. Eyes glittering, she threw herself upon another three men nearby. She kicked aside the hand of the first man who stabbed at her, sending his sword spinning away through the air. Then, stepping delicately to evade the blows of the remaining two, she kicked up so that the sole of her foot met the hilt of the sword as it came back to earth, sending it plunging into the first man’s chest.

“Nguh!” He fell backwards, scrabbling at the protruding blade. Historia didn’t wait for another attack to reach her. The other two came at her, but before the first man hit the ground, the blades of Azulune had pierced straight through their hearts.

“The girl’s no slouch!” someone shouted, and deranged eyes all turned to focus on Historia. Unconcerned, she extracted both her swords; then, as though she were tugging out loose threads, she flicked the blood that trickled from the blades to the ground. Then, she faced the raving Stonian soldiers who advanced on her and beckoned provocatively.

“Kill her!” they screamed, brandishing their weapons fiercely. Historia’s blade was impossible to pin down as she cleaved when they thought she would strike up and struck down when she seemed about to stab. She felled one Stonian after another, the savage swing of her blade fortified with her natural talent. Before anyone could react, she had piled up a great mound of corpses.

“Well, that about covers it,” Historia said, matter-of-fact and composed. Even the Stonian soldiers seemed wary of her now, coming to a halt in front of her. Historia didn’t miss the opportunity. “They’ve stopped! Now is your chance!

Charge them!” she shouted, pointing her sword towards the hole she had cut. The guardians surged forwards once more, bellowing like a raging storm.

Thirteen thousand against five thousand. With the hole Historia had torn in their ranks on top of the original imbalance in their numbers, the Stonian rear guard dropped like flies. Even after surrendering themselves to battle frenzy, they were still human, and humans will always reach their limit—especially such elderly soldiers.

As the hours wore on, the rear guard’s momentum faded until the tide of the battle had turned entirely in favor of the Winged Crusaders.

“My job here is done,” Historia said, scoffing. “I’ll leave Lara to mop up the rest.”

Looking away from the rear guard as they were overrun by the guardians, she turned to where Lara was. *They’re out of places to run at last...* she thought.

The rear guard had been whittled down to a mere two hundred soldiers, who were now totally surrounded. In a gesture of defiance, they closed ranks behind great shields while the Winged Crusaders slowly closed in. Just when it seemed like the face-off would drag on, there was a sudden break in the encircling ring. August held his breath and watched as four black horses came through, drawing a sort of carriage. This had to be the strange vehicle Cecilia had described.

And that means... August regarded the two people before him. One was a man in golden armor who appeared to be driving. The other, cutting an imposing figure as she stood with one foot resting on the man’s epaulet, was a woman with pale silver hair.

She held an arm out to one side and ordered, “Halt.” Everything in her bearing marked her without a doubt as the Winged Crusaders’ commander.

A woman is their commander? August wondered. *Suppose that follows when their ruler’s a woman too. But she doesn’t look much older than Cecilia...*

Even as he struggled to swallow all this, August called out to his surviving comrades, “Hold your formation.” Confirming their silent nods of understanding, August stepped forwards. The woman glanced at him, then stepped lightly down from the vehicle. The young lioness and the old lion faced

one another, as if to personify the changing age.

“You’re the commander of these soldiers?” she asked in ringing tones.

With a keen awareness of his own age, August replied that he was.

“Very well. Then tell me your name, you who were so foolish as to provoke the Holy Land of Mekia.”

“August gibb Lanbenstein,” August said at length. The woman’s eyes narrowed.

“Well, well. I’ve never heard of the field marshal leading the rear guard before...” she said. “How intriguing. I am Blessed Wing Lara, commander in chief of the Winged Crusaders. Out of respect for the reckless bravery you have shown, I would grant you the right to face me in single combat. What say you?”

Lara, as the woman had called herself, accurately guessed August’s rank, though he was sure he hadn’t revealed it to her. Scarcely two weeks had passed since the declaration of war to the outset of the battle, yet in that time Mekia’s intelligence agents had clearly been scrupulous. Despite the fact that they were enemies, August was straightforwardly impressed. At the same time, Lara’s proposal came to him like a godsend. He had already made up his mind that the only way to turn the battle now was to kill the enemy commander. He hadn’t dreamed that she would suggest a duel herself.

August was on the verge of giving his consent when a woman with silver eyes standing beside Lara cut in indignantly. “You can’t be serious, ser. We’re about to crush them. How do you get to *single combat* from that? I find it totally incomprehensible.”

“Do you really? I myself am most impressed by the mettle of a field marshal who would stay behind with his rear guard. Remember the story of the general who sent salt to his enemy when their supplies were cut off?”

“Yes, but this is too much salt, unless you’re planning on turning them into bacon.” The silver-eyed woman broke off, then threw up her hands in defeat. “But then I suppose it’s in character for you.” She stepped back without further protest. This told August she didn’t think it was possible Lara could lose the duel. The other soldiers were the very picture of composure. Not one showed

even a hint of perturbation.

“Forgive the interruption,” Lara went on. “Now, what say you?”

“I don’t see that I have much choice in the matter...” August said slowly. “But are you in earnest? You seem to have great confidence in your abilities, but it’s people like that who are most likely to slip.” August had known far too many braggarts who’d met their end at his blade.

August’s words had come from the kindness of an old man’s heart, but Lara answered them with a thin smile.

“Maybe so. I suppose there may be value in what you say, coming as it does from the field marshal’s lips. But don’t trouble yourself. Hear me now when I tell you, your sword will not touch me for even a moment.”

“Hmph. You talk a lot for such a whelp of a girl,” August retorted. “They call that arrogance, you know.” As he raised his sword high above his head, a strong gust of wind blew past him. Lara, meanwhile, stood at ease, not even bothering to draw her blade. “Remember that I’m still marshal before you think of mocking me, girl. I know that sword at your belt isn’t just a trinket. It’s about time you drew...” He paused, then added, “Surely you haven’t lost your nerve now?”

Lara didn’t cringe before the rage that colored his voice. Instead, she remarked lightly, “Oh, that’s right! I forgot to tell you one thing.”

“The time for talk is over. What can you have to say now?”

“I am the commander in chief of the Winged Crusaders,” Lara said, “but I am also a mage.”

“You’re a what?!”

“I have made good on my promise of single combat. Now, I bid you farewell.” She spun on her heel and began to walk away, leaving her back totally exposed.

August, unable to fathom the meaning of Lara’s actions, was left in a state of mild bemusement. Then, he heard something fall heavily at his feet. He looked down and saw two arms tightly gripping a dark red sword. He blinked several times. Those arms were intimately familiar to him.

“Are those...” he said slowly, “...my arms?” The anomalies in his body continued. He found his vision, which had been normal until moments ago, flipped upside down. He heard voices almost like screams coming from his own army. A voice as clear as a cloudless sky cut through them all.

“With my magecraft, I bend the wind to my will to call forth an invisible blade, pitiless and able to cut through even steel in an instant. This is the least I can offer you in tribute, Lord Marshal. I hope you will not hesitate to accept it.”

By the time Lara had finished speaking, August’s body lay in pieces on the ground.

“Clean up the rest, Historia,” Lara said dismissively as she passed the other woman. With a word of assent that was half a sigh, Historia slowly raised her left hand. With the force of an avalanche, the Winged Crusaders charged at the rear guard, who stood frozen in shock.

In the end, the Stonian Army lost forty thousand soldiers. The Winged Crusaders lost three thousand.

The Battle of Libera, instigated by the machinations of the empire, ended in an overwhelming victory for the Winged Crusaders.



Chapter Four: First Action

I

A fist shot out like a bolt of lightning, followed by an airborne spinning kick that cut through the air.

The year was Tempus Fugit 997.

With the dark red sun at her back, the girl moved freely around the training ground. All of a sudden, the air before her rippled, then was torn asunder. A thick black fluid came oozing out. The girl stopped what she was doing to watch as the fluid slowly assumed a familiar shape.

Z? What's up?

Z gazed out at the western sky and asked, *You will not hunt today?*

No, I still have leftovers from yesterday, the girl replied. She pointed at a stone hut that stood in a corner of the training ground. Z had built it for her as a storehouse in response to her pestering, and she was very pleased with it. Z's magic made it so that the inside of the storehouse was cold as winter all year round, so she didn't have to worry about the spoils of her hunting going bad. Behind the door just now was strung up a vampire bird, bled and frozen. Z turned towards the storehouse, then back to the girl.

Go on. Pay me no mind.

Okay! the girl replied, suddenly in high spirits. She could count on one hand the times Z had joined her outside of observation. She went through all her skills one after another to display the results of her daily training.

"Hiyah!" Her final kick stopped right at Z's throat. Z didn't twitch, even as the wind generated by the blow pushed its hood back. Only the ever-present black mist continued to coil.

How was that? she asked.

Z took its time before it responded. *When you made that final kick, your left foot pointed very slightly outward, and your toes were somewhat lifted, indicating that the axis of your body is off center. Repeat the kick, taking care with regards to those two points.*

Okay! The girl steadied her breathing, then, focusing on Z's advice, she threw another kick at its neck. There was a clapping sound as her foot pushed the air aside and Z's robe billowed.

The girl stared at her own right foot.

Remember that feeling, Z said, then clicked its fingers. The black vortex that the girl had named "The Mysterious Mystery Box of Mysteries" spun into being.

Z plunged its hand in, then tugged out a soft white towel, which it used to gently wipe the girl's face. This was so out of the blue that the girl, overcome by embarrassment, froze where she stood with her leg still outstretched.

U-Um, Z?

Z tossed the sweat-soaked towel back into the Mystery Box. *Fourteen years old already...* it said contemplatively. The girl felt that there was something odd about Z today, what with suddenly wiping her face.

Did something happen? she asked.

Z was silent for a time. *Do you remember your lesson from two weeks ago?*

Z sometimes asked her about past lessons for the purpose of revision, but only during observation time. This was very out of the ordinary.

The girl was perplexed, but even so, she spun up the Memory Wheel she had constructed in her mind and summoned the events of two weeks previous. This was her own special memory technique.

Umm. The thing about how it's important to create an environment for your soldiers to build momentum rather than rely on their abilities.

A log on flat ground would stay where it was, but put it on a slope and it would roll away, gathering energy. It was a lesson in how to arrange conditions that would make it easier to take the advantage in order to achieve victory in battle.

Not that, Z said.

The thing about how to trick your opponent then?

Deception was at the heart of warfare. A weak soldier could defeat a stronger one through the skillful employment of falsehoods.

Not that either.

Then that just leaves... The girl considered. You said that the Asvelt Empire attacked Kier Fortress, which belongs to the Kingdom of Fernest?

Precisely. The Asvelt Empire successfully captured Kier Fortress. It will not be long at this rate before the empire unifies the whole of Duvedirica.

Huh... the girl replied absently. As part of her daily education, Z also kept her up to date on the current state of the world. Two years earlier, Emperor Ramza XIII of the Asvelt Empire had declared the unification of the continent and sent a great force to invade the Kingdom of Fernest. That was the beginning of the so-called Second Continental War of Unification. Now, the fighting between these two nations had spilled over to spread war everywhere. The girl knew all this; she just wasn't interested at all. Her thinking was that so long as her life didn't change when one of them won, she didn't care.

Do you not want the Asvelt Empire to unify the continent, Z? The girl had never once seen Z display any interest in anything, so she doubted a mere human war had caught its attention, but she asked all the same.

Instead of answering her, Z only said, *Already so little time remains*, then vanished.

Little time remains? The girl repeated the words in her mind. She didn't have a clue what they might mean, but they stoked a sense of unease within her.

This was one year before Z disappeared for good.

II

Leticia Castle in the Kingdom of Fernest

Around a month had gone by since the battle between the Winged Crusaders and the Stonian Army. The newly formed Eighth Legion was about to begin a war council.

“Okay, everyone, the war council’s starting. Time to sit down.” There wasn’t a hint of tension in the voice of Major General Olivia Valedstorm, fresh from her special five-rank promotion, as she called for the room to be seated.

The History of Fernest recorded her as both the youngest general in the history of the kingdom, and also the youngest to be made commander of a legion.

When she sat down at the head of the long table, the others newly appointed as commanding officers in the Eighth Legion sat down smartly to her right and left.

The following eight individuals were present at the council: Legion Commander Major General Olivia Valedstorm; her aide, Lieutenant Colonel Claudia Jung; Major Ashton Senefelder, tactician; Second Lieutenant Gauss Osmeyer; Warrant Officer Gile Marrion; Warrant Officer Ellis Crawford; Second Lieutenant Evanson Crawford; and Captain Luke Crawford.

The Eighth Legion was made up of thirty-five thousand soldiers, making it at present second only to the First Legion in the Royal Army. It was clear just how much hope Cornelius placed on Olivia.

“The Eighth Legion’s first mission,” Claudia began, “is the invasion of the empire.” She didn’t sound excited about it. It was a fine thing that they had liberated the south and north of the kingdom from the clutches of the imperial army, but they had sustained terrible losses in doing so. Claudia appreciated that they wouldn’t get an advantage simply by holding the line, but the reality was that the Royal Army had far less latitude than the imperials. They had a decent number of soldiers, but looking past the numbers revealed that far too many of them were fresh recruits. For that very reason, if their invasion were to fail, it would only be a matter of time before they faced a harsh counterattack. At worst, this plan carried the potential to bring about the downfall of Fernest.

Everyone in the room seemed to understand that. With only a few exceptions, their expressions were troubled. When Claudia announced that

their final target was the imperial capital of Olsted, one of them, a large man with one eye, was unable to contain himself.

“No, no. No way,” burst out Second Lieutenant Gauss Osmeyer. “Come on, that’s too much. I don’t need to say it at this stage, but you know what, I’ll say it anyway. None but the famed *Azure Knights* are stationed in Olsted. We might not know just how strong they are, but I doubt they’re called the most elite in the empire for nothing. On top of that, we might’ve beaten them once, but the Crimson Knights and the Helios Knights are still alive and kicking, so we can count on them coming to resist our invasion too. Are they really telling the Eighth Legion to take *all* of them on? They might as well tell us to go straight to hell,” he finished with a bitter smile.

Ellis, who had served as Olivia’s body double against the Helios Knights, let out a sarcastic laugh. “Must be miserable when the only big thing about you is your body,” she sneered. “A real man would say, ‘Leave it to me.’ And did you forget who’s leading the Eighth Legion? My big sister, the most exalted beauty of beauties, *Olivia*. O-LI-VI-A! None of the empire’s knights come anywhere close to her—she wouldn’t break a sweat even if her opponent were the Goddess Strecia!”

Ellis, her hair now back to its natural brown, was pretty. Thus she gave, when she behaved herself, the impression of a shy maiden of good birth. Gentlemen could hardly fail to take notice of such a girl, but every man who approached her found himself so mercilessly lacerated by her sharp tongue that he ended crawling away on his hands and knees.

“The *Goddess Strecia*?” Gauss exclaimed back at her, but Ellis didn’t pay him any attention. She was gazing, besotted, at Olivia. Beside Olivia sat another man, nodding along to her every word. This was the former hunter, Gile.

He had been with Olivia on her very first mission and now commanded a great many soldiers, among whom he enjoyed a stellar reputation. He was also an unexpectedly sharp thinker and brave to boot, with a cheerful disposition that brightened any room. All in all, he was a capable soldier. Unfortunately, he also had a tendency to idolize Olivia to an excessive degree.

“I couldn’t agree more with Ellis,” he said now. “There’s no obstacle Captain

Olivia can't break through—she's our valkyrie, after all. The strongest in Duvedirica. You could even call her an angel come down to the mortal plane. Against this I shall hear no argument."

Ellis gave him a voluptuous look after this impassioned speech.

"Hmm, Gile, was it?" she said with interest. "There must be more to you than meets the eye for you to understand my big sister so well. I like you."

"You're more than I expected too, Ellis," Gile replied, and the pair grinned at each other before exchanging a handshake. Ellis's older brother Luke watched them despairingly, while her younger brother Evanson had his head in his hands.

Well, that's an annoying pair to see hit it off, Claudia thought with a sigh. *This is off to a bad start*. She observed Gauss heave a similar sigh. Perhaps he was more of a worrier than his face suggested.

And what was Olivia, the person at the center of all this, doing?

"Soo, is it ready yet? How about now?" She rocked back and forth in her chair like a pendulum, her eyes sparkling as they fixed on a wheeled cart.

"I think it's about time, yes. Today we have a Leygrantz tea."

"I know that one. It's a black tea from Mekia, right?"

"Very impressive, my lady," replied Marietty Contenue with a demure expression. She was the steward, presiding over the behind-the-scenes workings at Leticia Castle. She was seventy years old, but thanks to her impeccably straight posture, she looked younger even than Claudia's grandmother, Patra Jung, who was only sixty. Her white hair was tidily arranged and there wasn't a single wrinkle in her long gown of deep blue, from which her fastidious character was readily apparent. Anyone who saw the steely glint in her eyes, visible even behind her silver-rimmed spectacles, would understand why even Otto, the Man in the Iron Mask himself, held her in high esteem.

Marietty picked up the pale blue porcelain teapot with perfect elegance and from it poured a liquid the color of persimmons into the neat row of teacups. They steamed delicately and a pleasant aroma filled the meeting chamber. Olivia let out a gasp of anticipation.

“Leygrantz tea leaves take on depth and complexity of flavor the longer they are steeped. I recommend adding milk with your second cup for a little extra something,” Marietty said, placing a silver milk jug down beside the teacups while Olivia stared, captivated.

Based on this, Claudia guessed not only had Olivia not heard what Gile and Ellis had said, she hadn’t heard a word at all from the start. She stared at Olivia with more than a little exasperation until Luke cleared his throat a few times and said, “Lieutenant Colonel Claudia. As soldiers, we have no objection to fighting in and of itself. But do you think you could give us something a little more concrete? For my part, I find Second Lieutenant Gauss’s concerns to be eminently reasonable.”

Claudia nodded. “You’ll forgive me, my explanation was lacking. I’ll go through the details now, so I hope you’ll all listen closely.” The interruption from Ellis and Gile had thrown the discussion off track. The Royal Army, which up until now had taken a purely defensive position, was to invade imperial territory—the imperial capital of Olsted itself. The Eighth Legion would not be alone, of course. The First, Second, and Seventh Legions would join them for a force of one hundred and twenty thousand to mount a great counteroffensive. Including the logistical forces, who made up the army’s lifeline, they would be mobilizing around eighty percent of their entire force.

In the first stage of the plan, the First and Seventh Legions would advance on Kier Fortress. The empire would, of course, do anything to defend the fortress and so meet them with a force centered around the Helios Knights. The Royal Army, however, would have no intention of taking Kier Fortress. Their only aim would be to make a show of the battle—in other words, it would be a diversion on a massive scale. While the attention of the imperial army was focused on Kier Fortress, the plan would move to its second stage with the Second and Eighth Legions—the real stars of the show—marching on Fort Astora. The Second Legion’s primary objective would be to lead away the enemies who blocked their path so that the Eighth Legion might make it to Olsted while sustaining as few losses as possible.

Then came the final stage. The Eighth Legion would face off against the Azure Knights, who defended the imperial capital. If they could break through to

secure Lislein Castle, the seat of the emperor, their mission would be complete. It had been decided that the Sixth Legion, which would not be participating in the counteroffensive, would instead remain behind to defend the royal capital.

It sounded simple enough in words, but it wasn't hard to imagine the plethora of potential difficulties that lay in store for them. As the officers listened to Claudia's outline of this unparalleled strategy, their mouths set in hard lines.

"We will also be carrying out this plan in cooperation with the Holy Land of Mekia," Claudia said at last. At this, a stir went through the room. In fact, the tea that Olivia was now sipping with a dreamy look in her eyes had originally been sent by Mekia as a symbol of friendship. Until now, many nations had turned against Fernest, but not one had stood as their ally. Of course, in Claudia's opinion, there was nothing surprising in that.

At the end of the warlord period, the then king of Fernest, Raphael sem Galmond, had sought to dominate the whole of the continent just as the empire did now, and so dispatched his armies to all the different lands in a great display of force that served as the backdrop to an invasion. Half a century later, the ravages of that period of history were still starkly visible, and when the Asvelt Empire had made its declaration of unification and invaded Fernest, some nations had even volunteered their support.

For that reason, Claudia understood the others' reactions.

"The Holy Land of Mekia? The homeland of the Holy Illuminatus Church? Are you sure?" asked Evanson, looking thoroughly disbelieving. Claudia replied with a small nod.

"Did Fernest petition them for aid?"

"No, apparently it was the Mekians who proposed the coalition. I'm afraid I wasn't privy to the details of how it came to be..."

At Claudia's frank disclosure, complicated expressions clouded the faces of not only Evanson, but all the others at the table too. As he had expressed, Mekia was generally seen less as a nation than as the holy land and the home of the Artemiana Cathedral. Its location far to the west also contributed to the paucity of information. Claudia herself only knew that Mekian-made ore and

ornaments sold for toweringly high prices, and she expected the same went for the others present.

As she thought this, Claudia was struck by a hateful recollection of flaxen hair and handsome features. She remembered the man who had lied about his name and his rank to successfully sneak into the victory banquet to get close to Olivia. When Olivia had told her later that he was from the Holy Land of Mekia, she had simply felt surprised. But now that they had made official overtures, she perceived that his actions had been one part of a reconnaissance operation.

Oh, I hate this, Claudia thought, downing her tea in a single gulp.

“Given that we’re stretched thin with both soldiers and resources compared to the imperial army, I don’t begrudge the Holy Land of Mekia’s support, I just... I only...” As Luke trailed off mumbling, Ellis picked up where he left off.

“I think what my brother’s trying to say,” she said with a glance his way, “is that we don’t see how the army of some tiny nation can be of much help. Trying to integrate another army’s forces could cause our coordination to break down. My brother’s unbearably serious, so it’s just like him,” she added with a sarcastic smile. Luke opened and closed his mouth like he wanted to make some retort, but in the end he nodded grudgingly.

Ellis’s point was correct in its generalities but, as Claudia now expressed, in this case such concern was groundless.

Luke immediately demanded, “What do you mean by groundless?”

“That’s what I’m about to tell you. But first, if you could all look over the report you are about to receive.” At a look from Claudia, an underling standing at the ready quickly began to pass out the papers in question. Claudia confirmed that everyone had received a copy, then, holding her own in one hand, said, “Approximately one month ago, our neighbor, the Principality of Stonia, invaded the Holy Land of Mekia.”

“Stonia? The Empire’s vassal state invaded Mekia?” Gauss said, stroking his chin as he read the report. “That smells mighty fishy.”

“I agree,” Claudia said. “Even simply considering the distance, there’s no way those two countries had anything to do with each other. I think it’s safe to

assume that the empire was at work behind the scenes, though I can't say what they hoped to achieve."

"Yeah, I'd say there's no doubt of that."

"But that isn't the problem."

"Meaning what, exactly?" Ellis asked quickly before Gauss could open his mouth.

"The problem," Claudia replied, "is the Winged Crusaders—that's what the Mekians call their army. They fought off the Stonian Army with a force scarcely half that of the invaders, and it only took them half a day."

What this meant, in short, was that the Holy Land of Mekia, though small, had a superbly powerful army. The room fell into stunned silence as Claudia stated this, everyone preoccupied by their own thoughts.

It was easy enough to say, but actually defeating an enemy force twice as great as one's own was anything but easy. To do so in half a day was terrifying, Claudia thought. Anyone familiar with battle would feel the same way.

"Well, that's very reassuring, but Mekia wouldn't offer their strength to us unless they were getting something out of it. What can you tell us about that?" When Ashton, who had thus far stayed silent, asked his question, all eyes turned to look at him. Ashton, whom Paul had praised in private as a peerless tactical mind, was making a name for himself within the Royal Army after so many plans of his devising had contributed to their victories.

Claudia regarded him. It wasn't uncommon these days to catch sight of female soldiers giving him burning looks, and some even made explicit advances. Claudia drove them off, knowing that many men were turned soft by romantic liaisons.

Whether or not Ashton could be spoken of as soft, only the gods knew, but he was already twenty years old. When it came to men of his age, one couldn't be too careful.

But the man himself seems well and truly confounded by the situation, Claudia thought.

Feeling Ashton's eyes boring into hers, she cleared her throat before answering.

"I'm sure they'll have made some demand, of course. But it can't have been anything too excessive, seeing as we are to form a united front. Does not knowing what it was bother you?"

"I suppose..." Ashton replied slowly. "I'd be lying if I said it didn't. Why did they choose now to ally themselves with Fernest? What do you think, Olivia?"

Olivia, who had been just as quiet as Ashton—or rather, absorbed in drinking her tea—put down her teacup and said matter-of-factly, "Of course they'll have some other motive. Reaching out now is just a little unnatural."

"So you think so too, then?"

"Yeah. Whatever they asked for could easily be a cover itself."

"The demand itself a cover..." Ashton repeated, narrowing his eyes as he stared into the distance. "You're right. That's very plausible."

"Yeah, because they don't want us to pick up on their true objective. It's a common tactical play," Olivia said breezily as she leaned her whole chair backwards. At such an extreme angle, the chair ought to have gone toppling over, but she kept it perfectly balanced. It was a trick that required no small amount of core strength to pull off.

"Any ideas as to what this true objective might be?" Ashton asked.

Everyone looked at Olivia. She scratched her cheek, looking a little sheepish, and replied, "Beats me, I'm afraid."

"Here I was convinced that for you, some animal instinct would've given you the answer."

"That's not very nice," Olivia commented, then added with a conclusive air, "Still, whatever happens, we ought to keep an eye on them." Ashton nodded without another word.

Here, Marietty spoke. "My lady, I can't say whether this is related to the matter at hand, but there is to be a great dinner party at Leticia Castle soon. They—"

“And?” Olivia said, butting in right in the middle with her head tilted at a perplexed angle. “They literally just threw that victory banquet. It’s not like it’s unusual.”

“Please, allow me to finish. They say that King Alfonse has invited the ruler of Mekia as a guest of honor.”

“Hmm,” Olivia said disinterestedly, tapping her finger on the rim of her teacup. She didn’t seem to think this information was worth her attention.

“They say the ruler...” Marietty paused. “She dearly wishes for the general here to attend.”

“Olivia?” Ashton exclaimed at once, his face darkening. Ellis, meanwhile, leapt from her chair with an ecstatic expression the exact opposite of Ashton’s.

“Olivia’s reputation has spread as far as this tiny country in the west? That’s so amazing! Don’t you think, Gile?”

“But of course,” Gile replied. “It’s only a matter of time before everyone on the continent knows the name of our Captain Olivia.”

Shaking her head at Ellis and Gile’s silliness, Claudia mulled over Ashton and Olivia’s exchange.

If we assume the general’s hunch is correct, I wouldn’t be surprised if this Mekian ruler wishing her to attend the dinner party means what they’re really after is the general herself. In fact, it makes perfect sense when you think about what Johann was up to... A golden glint appeared in Claudia’s eyes. Looks like I’ll have to keep a very close eye on the general.

The rest of the council went on without incident, as each of them applied themselves to remembering their respective duties. When Claudia brought things to a close, they all departed with determination in their eyes.

III

Field Marshal Cornelius’s Workroom at Leticia Castle in Fernest

The sun’s piercing rays shone down, scorching hot as though it were midsummer, on the day the news reached a busy-as-usual Cornelius.

“You’re saying that the United City-States of Sutherland are making suspicious movements?” The marshal sat down at his desk without hurry and looked up at the handsome, blond-haired youth who stood before him.

“Yes, ser,” replied Major General Neinhardt. “Or more accurately, Sutherland’s Twelfth City of Northern Perscilla is assembling an army. The details are in here.” He held out a document and Cornelius accepted it. Pulling a pair of spectacles from the desk drawer, he peered at the words written there.

It reported that Northern Perscilla was gathering soldiers at Fort Safar, which lay on the border with the kingdom. It took scarce mental effort to conclude that they were planning military action against Fernest. Cornelius read the whole report through, then signed it and handed it back to Neinhardt.

The young man took it dutifully. “Is Sutherland marching at last, then?” he blurted out as though he couldn’t help himself.

“This more or less confirms it. I imagine they saw a juicy opportunity with the empire falling back,” Cornelius replied, accepting a cup of tea proffered by a servant as he continued. “By the way, this report mentioned only Northern Perscilla. What are the other cities up to, I wonder?”

“Only the Twelfth City appears to be stirring at present. I’ve received no reports of any notable activity from any of the other cities as of yet.”

“Then it would appear this decision was not made unanimously within Sutherland,” Cornelius said with relief. Sutherland bringing all its armies to bear in an invasion against Fernest was the worst-case scenario. Such an army would number no fewer than two hundred thousand soldiers, and that was a low estimate. Fernest did not have the soldiers to fight Sutherland properly right now. As the leader of the Royal Army, Cornelius knew this fact better than anyone.

“Do you think it likely that Northern Perscilla is acting alone then, Lord Marshal?” Neinhardt asked.

“Yes. The city-states of Sutherland, though we call them cities, maintain independent autonomy. I suspect that the other cities have no involvement with this particular matter.”

Still, with preparations well underway for their counteroffensive into the empire, the timing of Northern Perscilla's plotted invasion couldn't have been more inconvenient. Cornelius heaved a heavy sigh.

"Don't worry, ser," said Neinhardt. "Against the forces of a single city, we have plenty of options available to us."

Cornelius felt his mouth quirk in a wry smile, one that expressed two different meanings—his remorse at making this young man express such solicitude towards him, and his wondering why Neinhardt couldn't direct that same solicitude towards his aide, Katerina.

There had been an incident a few days previously that had stuck in Cornelius's mind. He had happened to come across Katerina in the corridor, and so had in passing asked her about her progress with Neinhardt. After standing frozen for a few moments as though turned to stone, she had, with her eyes fixed on the floor, muttered sheepishly, "He's not so well-versed in that area..."

I did try to advise her that such men need things spelled out for them... Cornelius reflected. *I wonder how it will work out.*

"Is something the matter, Lord Marshal?" asked Neinhardt.

"What? Oh, nothing," Cornelius said, deflecting. "Now, in that case, we'll need to have someone deal with them..." Even as he spoke, however, the face of a beautiful young girl was already in his mind's eye. Neinhardt, apparently guessing what Cornelius was thinking, grimaced.

"Major General Olivia and the Eighth Legion, I suppose."

"Indeed. It's not what we had planned, but there will be no other chance for a first action like it."

Even now, Lambert still hadn't come to terms with Olivia commanding the Eighth Legion. He wasn't the sort of man to voice criticisms once a decision had been made, but thanks to their long acquaintance, Cornelius could read his thoughts quite clearly.

"Shall I summon Major General Olivia, then?"

"Hmm..." Cornelius mused. "Where is she right now?"

“I imagine at this hour she’s at the training grounds. This is when they drill the fresh recruits.”

“What do you say we go and see her there, then?” Cornelius put his hands on the arms of his chair and slowly pushed himself up, waving aside Neinhardt who had hurried to hold a hand out to him.

“I hardly think you need to go yourself, my lord...”

“Why not? I am curious as to how the major general is training her new troops,” Cornelius said. From what he’d heard, Olivia was not only an exceptional individual warrior, but also possessed an extraordinary head for strategy and tactics. How she had developed the independent cavalry regiment into an elite force in such a short span of time could only be described as brilliant.

“I shall accompany you then,” Neinhardt said promptly.

In response, Cornelius only said quietly, “I don’t believe I’m so decrepit that I need a chaperone yet.”

Neinhardt was constantly snowed under with work coordinating all the different legions. Cornelius, by way of consideration of this fact, had meant his words as a refusal, but Neinhardt only looked conflicted for a moment before he made his face neutral and once again requested permission to accompany Cornelius.

Dear me. I suppose arguing further is futile, Cornelius thought. Suppressing a sigh, he gave his permission.

IV

Upon arriving at the training grounds just outside Leticia Castle, they were greeted by a rousing voice and a scene Neinhardt found quite bizarre. He quickly identified the owner of the voice as Claudia.

“Is that *training*?” Cornelius asked, utterly bewildered.

“I—I think so, but...” Neinhardt found he couldn’t honestly answer, for the reason that the new recruits, dressed in full armor, were being pursued by a

number of beasts. If anything, it looked like some sort of show, though he doubted it was much fun for the recruits.

“Unless my eyesight is failing me, those look like dusksight wolves...”

Neinhardt spun around, unable to believe his ears, and his gaze met Cornelius’s. It wasn’t often that the Invincible General’s face went as rigid as it was now. Neinhardt turned his gaze back to the beasts.

He’s right, he thought after a moment. Those are definitely dusksight wolves. What’s going on here?

Dusksight wolves, with their purple eyes and glossy white fur, were class one dangerous beasts. The threat they posed to humans was comparatively low, but only if your point of comparison was class *two* dangerous beasts. In a pack, they could still strip the flesh from a person’s bones in the blink of an eye. Of course, they never took to humans, and the idea of *taming* one was total fantasy.

Not that anyone would ever even attempt to tame one... Thinking that for now he’d ask about the situation, Neinhardt turned to the shouting Claudia. That was when Olivia, who sat crouched at one side of the platform, caught sight of him. She tossed away something that looked like a twig as she came dashing down the bank to him, waving her hands excitedly.

“Mr. Fish—Major General Neinhardt! Lord Cornelius!” She greeted them with a smile. “Come to check out our training routine?”

Neinhardt cleared his throat several times. He, too, had been promoted to major general for his achievements on the central front, so there was no need for any formality between Olivia and himself now. Field Marshal Cornelius, however, was a different story. Neinhardt wasn’t about to start berating her like Otto, but she still ought to have shown the bare minimum of courtesy.

Olivia understood the meaning behind his cough at once. “I mean, have you come to observe our training routine, ser?” she corrected, clicking her heels together and saluting smartly.

She’s gotten so much more perceptive since I first met her a year and a half ago, Neinhardt thought, getting rather sentimental at Olivia’s growth.

“There’s that, but we also have something to talk to you about.”

“Is that right, ser!”

“Before that though—this *is* definitely training, is it not?” Cornelius inquired, looking over at the recruits who were wailing loudly.

Olivia’s eyes flicked over to the training ground for a moment before she answered shortly, “Yes, ser.”

A brief period of silence hung between the three of them. The voices of the recruits rang all the louder in their ears. Cornelius tugged at his beard with a harried air.

“The beasts pursuing those soldiers...” he tried again. “They are, ah, dusksight wolves?”

“Yes, ser. They are definitely dusksight wolves,” Olivia confirmed without hesitation. Judging by the blank look on her face, she didn’t think this was anything out of the ordinary. Neinhardt and Cornelius turned reflexively to look at one another when they heard Claudia’s bellow from in front of them.

“Come on, run! Run like your life depends on it, unless you want to be wolf food!”

They also saw another small crowd making desperate appeals to Ashton, who stood right nearby the platform.

I suppose it won’t do to just pretend I never saw any of this... Neinhardt thought. Olivia was commander of the Eighth Legion both in name and in reality. It wasn’t his place to comment on the details of how she trained her soldiers, but this was more than he could bring himself to ignore.

“Major General Olivia, as Lieutenant Colonel Claudia was just saying, don’t you think the wolves are actually going to eat them if you let this carry on? I really can’t guess what sort of training you are conducting here, but don’t you think this goes a bit far?”

These soldiers were valuable, even if they were new recruits. She couldn’t just say *they were devoured by dusksight wolves in a training drill* and brush it aside if anything should happen. He of course thought Olivia understood this, but even so, he couldn’t not check. Alas, Olivia was indifferent to his advice.

“Huh? They won’t eat anyone,” she said, her tone as breezy as ever. “See, we’re keeping it a secret from the new recruits, but I told them not to eat anyone.”

Neinhardt was perfectly baffled by this. “By ‘them,’ you mean the dusksight wolves?”

“Yes, who else?” As usual, nothing that came out of Olivia’s mouth was what Neinhardt had expected, and his bafflement only deepened. Seeing this, Olivia said she’d prove it to him. She put her fingers to the corners of her mouth and whistled loudly. At once, all the dusksight wolves that had been so intent on their pursuit of the new recruits stopped in their tracks. They all slowly turned their heads towards Olivia and the others, then came bounding towards them.

“Huh?!”

“Lord Marshal!” Neinhardt cried. He threw himself in front of Cornelius and drew his sword. But Olivia only smiled.

“I told you, it’s fine,” she said, squatting down and opening her arms wide. The dusksight wolves dived at Olivia, as though to pounce—

“Hey, stop licking! That tickles!” Olivia let out a peal of laughter as the wolves bowled her over, kicking her legs up and down in a transport of delight. The wolves at the very least seemed to have no intention of devouring Olivia. On the contrary, they rubbed their heads against her and whined for her attention. Neinhardt couldn’t string two words together. *This has to be a dream*, he thought. It was instead Cornelius, cold sweat beading on his brow, who spoke.

“These dusksight wolves, they’re...” he stammered. “They’re all right?”

Olivia slowly sat up. “Yep. Like I said, I told them they mustn’t eat humans—*ser*,” she added hastily as she softly petted the wolves’ heads. “I’m giving them food they like instead. Though it doesn’t taste good, so I don’t like it much myself.”

“Food they like?” Cornelius echoed. There was no telling what a dusksight wolf might prefer to feed on. Neinhardt felt a stirring of interest.

“Yeah. It’s actually time for their lunch now, so you can come—I mean, would you like to come along, *ser*?” She leaned in close so they were almost nose to

nose. Overwhelmed, Cornelius and Neinhardt were helpless to do anything but nod. “Then let’s be off. Claudia!” Olivia shouted and Claudia came hurrying down the bank towards them.

The first thing out of her mouth was an apology. “Please pardon my failure to receive you, sers!”



Neinhardt replied that as the visit had been unscheduled, there was no need for concern.

“Time for a break,” Olivia told her. “I’m going to feed Patches, Spot, and Pooch now.”

“Very well, ser,” Claudia replied. “And will you be joining her, Lord Marshal?”

“Indeed, I think I shall.”

“I see...” Claudia looked up at Cornelius with anxiety in her eyes, but when she turned to Neinhardt, she wore an evil grin, like a child plotting mischief.

There’s something odd going on here, he thought, and was about to say as much when Ashton called out to Claudia, and she hurried away back to the training ground.

“Let’s go then.” Olivia turned from Neinhardt as he stood there doubtfully and began walking, setting a brisk pace. The dusksight wolves followed close on her heels, like a personal guard. It was positively unsettling how they turned back at regular intervals to regard him and Cornelius.

Well, it’s too late to turn back now, but have we ever stepped in it this time. Thank goodness I didn’t let Lord Cornelius come alone.

As far as Neinhardt was concerned, whatever assurances Olivia might give, these were still wild animals—and class one dangerous beasts, at that. These weren’t any ordinary beasts. There was no telling when they might turn those savage claws and fangs on him, and as such, he couldn’t let his guard down for even a moment.

Keeping at a safe distance from the wolves, he and Cornelius followed them down a peaceful path, along which little flowers bloomed. After about five minutes, the mouth of a cave in the row of mountains on their right came into view. Olivia turned and, with a spring in her step, headed off towards the cave.

“Are we headed for that cave?” Neinhardt asked, keeping his voice low so as not to provoke the wolves.

“That’s right,” Olivia replied blithely, her face still pointed straight ahead. “It’s cool inside the cave, so it’s perfect for storing food.”

Not long after, the three humans and three wolves reached the entrance to the cave. Olivia said, “Off you go,” and the slaving wolves bounded off into its depths. To the other officers, she said encouragingly, “Let’s follow them.” Neinhardt felt cool air engulf him as they stepped into the cave.

“It really is chilly,” he observed.

“Right? It’s the *perfect* spot to take a nap,” Olivia said smugly as she led them deeper into the cave. It wasn’t nearly as deep as the breadth of the entrance suggested. It was only a short walk to the very back, and there was enough light from the sun that they didn’t even need torches.

“M-Major General Olivia,” Cornelius said breathlessly, reaching out a pointing finger, “is *that* what the dusksight wolves like to eat?”

“Yep. They look like they’re enjoying it, don’t they?” On the ground, with its beautiful golden coat and distinctive sharp horn, lay the lifeless form of a great beast.

There’s no mistaking it. That’s...that’s a real unicorn...! Neinhardt felt a rush of long-dormant emotions as cold sweat broke out on his spine. This was his second encounter with the class two dangerous beast known as a unicorn.

The first time had been half a year after Neinhardt had graduated top of his class at the military academy. His orders were to exterminate a unicorn that had suddenly appeared in a village. He took a hundred seasoned warriors and engaged the unicorn in what grew into a fierce battle. By the end, Neinhardt had sustained his own wounds, and though they slew the beast at last, fewer than twenty of his soldiers made it out alive. Everyone had lauded Neinhardt as a hero, but he had been crushed. He wondered if less blood might have been spilled if only he had done better.

I never thought I’d see one of these accursed nightmares again... Neinhardt took a deep breath to calm himself as Cornelius sank down onto a convenient boulder, looking utterly exhausted. Meanwhile, Olivia gazed at the dusksight wolves as they buried their snouts in the unicorn’s belly, a fond smile on her face.

“You didn’t kill the unicorn with the new recruits, did you?” Neinhardt asked, though he didn’t think for a moment that new recruits could do anything

against a unicorn. Olivia confirmed the recruits had had nothing to do with it. This only left one possible conclusion.

“Major General Olivia, did you do this *alone*?”

“Yep. There aren’t many in the mountains or forests around here, so it was pretty tough hunting it down.” She laughed, like this was nothing. A shudder ran through Neinhardt.

Thinking back, there had been a report that during the liberation of Fort Lamburke they had been unlucky enough to run into a unicorn, only for Olivia to kill it in an instant. At the time, Neinhardt hadn’t paid much attention to the report of a new recruit. There were some beasts that closely resembled unicorns, after all. But now, with a unicorn laid sprawled before his eyes, he had no choice but to believe it.

The dusksight wolves seemed to have eaten their fill, because they came back to gather around Olivia, rubbing their heads against her legs with an air of satisfaction.

“Looks like your tummies are all full,” Olivia said, then turned back to Neinhardt and Cornelius. “Shall we go back to the training ground, then?”

“That’s quite all right with me,” Cornelius replied, fatigue audible in his voice. “But first, I wonder if you could explain the purpose behind that training from earlier. I’m afraid I don’t have the slightest idea what you’re up to.”

Olivia replied that it was to strengthen the recruits’ lower bodies. According to her argument, it wasn’t strength or skill that governed a battle, but speed. It went without saying for an individual soldier, but an army moving swiftly could catch its enemy unawares. Using the dusksight wolves in her training regimen was both running practice for the recruits and a way to make them tame their fear. Further questioning revealed that Ashton had proposed the idea, which puzzled Neinhardt. The risky idea didn’t seem like him.

“I don’t think dusksight wolves are all that different from stray dogs, really,” Olivia went on. There was nothing either Neinhardt or Cornelius could think to say to that.

V

When Claudia called an end to the training, the new recruits all collapsed in a heap on the ground that was now turning crimson in the light of the setting sun.

She, Olivia, and Ashton turned from the whimpering recruits and set off for Leticia Castle, where Cornelius awaited them. Ashton let out a sigh.

“You like sighing, don’t you, Ashton?” Olivia remarked. “That’s the tenth one.”

“What’re you keeping count for? As if anyone goes around sighing because they *like* it.”

“Then what’re you sighing so much for?”

Ashton paused for a moment. “I didn’t know Lord Cornelius was going to show up all of a sudden.” He should have known that using dusksight wolves in their training regimen was a step too far.

Claudia turned around with a loud huff where she was walking in front of them. “It’s a bit late for that now, isn’t it?” she snapped. “What’s done is done. There’s no point bringing it up.”

“I mean, sure, I guess,” Ashton grumbled, “but this is all Olivia’s fault. She’s the one who said setting dusksight wolves on them would make for better training than stray dogs.” His eyes bored into her, and she saw a touch of resentment there. It was a strong accusation he was making.

“Ashton, you said, all serious, ‘Good idea. That’ll make the training stick better.’” Olivia pointed out. “What you’re doing is called an ‘about-face,’ did you know that?” Olivia turned her own face from side to side to demonstrate.

“Yeah, well,” Ashton retorted, “I was obviously joking, wasn’t I? No one could’ve predicted you’d show up with *real* dusksight wolves.” He turned to Claudia. “You agree, don’t you?”

“Well, yes. I suppose so,” she said with a forced smile.

“Why’d you think I was joking?” Olivia asked. There were dusksight wolves all over Duvedirica. They weren’t all that hard to find, and in the end, she’d had no trouble running into the pack in the nearby forest. She’d caught three of them and brought them back to the training ground.

“Because dusksight wolves are a class one dangerous beast,” said Ashton. “This isn’t like you picked up some dogs and cats off the street.”

In a last-ditch effort, Ashton had demanded that, outside of training hours, the wolves were to be shut up in a cage that the new recruits had worked like demons to construct. To Olivia, this went against all reason. The natural thing, she thought, was for beasts to romp about all over the place.

“They’re not even dangerous, though,” she said. “Patch, Spot, and Pooch are *adorable*.”

“‘Patch, Spot, and Pooch’?” Ashton repeated incredulously. “You can’t give cutesy names to the *dusksight wolves*.”

“I don’t see why not. Besides, they didn’t eat the new recruits, did they? Just like I told them.”

“Of course not! If anyone had been eaten by a wolf, all hell would’ve broken loose. Honestly, in all the wide world, you are the only one who’d ever call dusksight wolves ‘adorable.’” Ashton finished with a look of disgust.

Privately, Olivia was perplexed. Dusksight wolves, with their sweet indigo eyes and fluffy coats that engulfed them like summer clouds, had more than enough adorable qualities.

“That’s not true,” she said. “Right, Claudia! You definitely think Pooch and the others are cute, right?”

“Me?” Claudia hesitated for a moment, then said, “As they are under your control at present, ser, I don’t feel threatened by them, but I don’t know if I’d go as far as calling them ‘cute’...” She looked away, uncomfortable, while Ashton nodded with the air of saying *I told you so*.

But Olivia had a counterargument ready to go. “What? That doesn’t make any sense,” she said.

“What doesn’t, ser?”

“I mean, there’s that soft toy that looks just like Pooch in your ro—?!” Olivia was yanked forwards as Claudia’s hand shot out and grabbed her while another closed over her mouth.

As she reeled from the shock, Claudia leaned in and hissed in her ear. “What’s this all of a sudden, General?”

This hardly seemed like the relevant question when Claudia was the one who’d suddenly blocked her mouth, but Olivia knew for certain that Claudia was a yaksha right now. She was too scared to look at her face, but she was sure all the same. The frozen look of terror on Ashton’s face was irrefutable proof. Recently, Ashton too had come to notice Claudia’s habit of turning into a yaksha, and the two of them had agreed together to do their best not to incite the transformation. This was, of course, kept absolutely secret from Claudia.

Olivia quickly raised her hands to indicate she meant no harm, and Claudia’s grip slowly loosened. Stealing a tentative look at the other girl’s face, she saw Claudia’s usual ordinary serious expression there. She had changed back.

Phew, today’s transformation was a short one... Olivia thought. *But I wonder why she transformed?* Musing on this question, she let out a little sigh of relief.

“B-By the way,” said Ashton, “did Lord Cornelius and Lord Neinhardt come all the way to the training ground just to see our training routine?”

Claudia observed with a wry smile that lately, Ashton had gotten a lot better at taking a hint.

“The lord marshal and Nein—the major general are extremely busy with the coming operation. I seriously doubt they have time to waste on observing training routines...”

She referred to the great counteroffensive strategy against the empire, dubbed the Twin Lions at Dawn, in which Olivia’s task was to conquer the imperial capital of Olsted. In order to do this, they would have to defeat the imperial army’s most elite Azure Knights, and it was this which had Claudia day in and day out frantically trying to whip the new recruits into shape.

Olivia too knew the commander of the Azure Knights, Felix von Sieger, very well. She had only seen him once, at the exchange of prisoners at Kier Fortress, but she would never forget that face. In her whole life, he was the only human who had ever made her wary.

“—thing, Olivia?”

“Huh? What?”

“You weren’t even listening!” Ashton rolled his eyes, and Olivia laughed sheepishly.

“Sorry, sorry. What were you saying?”

“I wondered if Marshal Cornelius had told you anything.”

“Oh, that. I’m not really sure. He just said there was something really important.”

“If it’s really important, why’d he leave without saying what it was? Just between us, now it’s taking up twice as much time for all of us.”

“It is odd...” Claudia agreed. As though they’d choreographed it in advance, she and Ashton folded their arms in unison. The two of them had been in perfect sync lately. This thought cheered Olivia for some reason.

Copying the gesture, she said, “I’m not sure. He just said he was worn out.”

On the way back to the training ground, Cornelius had ordered Olivia to report to the castle. Olivia thought nothing of the distance between Leticia Castle and the training ground, but it was a rather long way, and Cornelius was very old. It must have been quite hard on him.

“I can see why, after seeing dusksight wolves *and* a unicorn on the same day.”

“Even Lord Cornelius couldn’t have been prepared for a unicorn.”

Claudia and Ashton exchanged knowing smiles.

“How could seeing a unicorn make you tired?” Olivia asked. Disappointment she would have understood. Unicorns were not good to eat.

“Okay, look,” Ashton said. “Maybe unicorns are old hat for you, Olivia, but they’re not something normal people see every day. If anything, normal people would prefer to not see one even once.” He finished with a shudder.

“Until Ashton told me, I thought you were joking,” Claudia added softly, a distant look in her eyes. In the end, Olivia still hadn’t learned why Cornelius was so worn out, but it didn’t especially concern her, so she decided to let it go.

“Well, I don’t mind the extra work at all,” she said. “If we go to the castle,

Lord Cornelius might bring out tasty sweets again.” And with an impish grin, she grabbed each of their arms to draw them to her.

After this, the three of them made their way to Cornelius’s workroom, where he told them that it was highly likely that Northern Perscilla was planning to invade Fernest. Ashton and Claudia both tensed when they learned that the duty of subduing the invasion had fallen to the Eighth Legion. Only Olivia sat slumped in her seat, staring glumly at the empty table.

Chapter Five: The Battle of Vilan

I

It was the Burning Moon, Tempus Fugit 1000. The Northern Perscillan Army under the command of Argerion Gravis Arthur marched from Fort Safar and entered the Feldona Hills that bordered on the Kingdom of Fernest's southern lands. From there, they at last began their invasion.

With a combined force of around forty thousand soldiers, Arthur went through capturing smaller forts as they pressed on to the north-northeast. When they stopped to rest by the crescent-shaped Lake Sith, he held a war council.

"Is something wrong?" Arthur asked.

"I have news that cannot wait." Arthur's adviser, Argerion Lasie Hile, listened, nodding a few times as the soldier whispered in his ear. Then, he quietly approached his master.

"Our scouts have captured a number of deserters from the Royal Army. One of them says that if we spare the lives of their troops, they will give us valuable information..." Lasie paused, then said dubiously, "What do you think, ser?"

"Valuable information? I wouldn't expect deserters to have much of use to us..." Arthur mused. "But why not? Bring them to me."

"At once, ser." Lasie passed the order on to the soldier, who came back in no time with the bound prisoners. They didn't appear at all cowed.

"I don't think much of deserters," Arthur told them. "Though you've got some pluck by the look of you."

The man before him had a glint of intelligence in his eyes, and there wasn't an ounce of extra fat on his body. His appearance did not give the impression of incompetence, but at that moment, a smirk spread across his face.

Lasie chastised him for this disrespectful attitude, then whispered to Arthur

that the prisoner held the rank of captain.

“I wasn’t interested in staying any longer on a sinking ship,” the man drawled.

“A sinking ship, you say...” Arthur said slowly. “An apt expression, on the whole. But what of your loyalty to Fernest? Do you have none?”

Given the current state of the kingdom, it wasn’t hard to understand why a soldier might desert. But that sort of thing was only for conscripts. Though there was no proof that this man was a captain, his appearance left no doubt as to its truth. He was, therefore, not like some common soldier. The Royal Army might have fallen far, but even then, Arthur had only scorn for an officer in command of other soldiers who could so easily abandon his post.

“Loyalty...” the man said thoughtfully. “You can only have loyalty when there is someone to offer it to. I’m afraid that in the kingdom as it is now, having loyalty is impossible.”

At this, Arthur showed a certain degree of understanding. Word had reached even him of the foolishness of Alfonse sem Galmond. He was undoubtedly a far cry from a figure who would inspire loyalty.

“I have heard enough about this. Let’s hear this supposedly valuable information you have.”

“First, I ask for your word that you will spare my soldiers.”

“That will depend on what you tell us.”

“I am confident that you will be satisfied.”

“That is not for you to judge...” Arthur began, then stopped. “Oh, very well.” Overlooking a few vermin could hardly lead to any harm to his force. He gave his word on his honor as Arthur Mau Finn, and just like that, the deserter began to speak.

“It’s just as you predicted, ser,” Lasie said, staring at Arthur in awe. The other assembled officers wore more or less the same expression.

“It’s hardly shocking,” Arthur said. “We knew very well their forces were utterly insufficient for their conflict with the empire.”

“Even so, I never imagined they could only put together a force of ten thousand. How the Land of Lions has fallen...”

Already, the Northern Perscillans had captured three small forts without a single loss, thanks above anything else to the fact that each had been utterly deserted of enemy soldiers. Holing up in a castle when faced with a great force wasn't always the correct course, as it was a strategy that ultimately relied on the existence of reinforcements. Having said that, a sturdy fort with enough soldiers to defend it and ample supplies could potentially repel an attacker.

All the forts they had taken thus far, however, were plainly remnants of the warlord period. They could hardly be called sturdy, and with Sutherland's economic blockade still in effect, ample supplies were far out of Fernest's reach. Arthur had been told that when they opened up the storerooms, they had not found even a crumb of bread inside. Fernest was hard pressed for both soldiers and food. It was inevitable that this would limit the tactical options available to the Royal Army, so that they were forced to concentrate their forces into a surprise attack. This, the deserter's story had made clear.

“What position will the Royal Army choose? I would guess around here, incidentally.” Arthur pointed his baton towards a point on the map of southern Fernest that lay spread open on the table: it read *Galloch Canyon*. The canyon was a journey of two or three days from their current location, a great rent in the land formed by the erosion of the Madross River. It provided the perfect terrain for staging a battle with a smaller force.

“You are correct, my lord,” the deserter confirmed at once. “The Royal Army will be positioned in the Galloch Canyon.”

“Then this will be easy. We will circle around the canyon.” Tracing his finger along the map, Lasie explained that passing through the nearby Calbadia Hills, or else the Olstoy Forest, would bring them to the Vilan Plateau, and how from there, they could march south and hit the Royal Army from behind. It was a sound strategy, as one would expect of an advisor. But Arthur dismissed it at once.

“Circling around will take too much time. We will march directly to the Galloch Canyon.”

“Directly, ser?” an Argerion Petrus asked hesitantly.

“Directly.”

“Then you mean to deliberately step into the enemy’s trap?”

Lasie’s eyes widened, as did those of the deserter, staring at Arthur with unease quickly spreading through the assembled officers like ripples in a pool.

“We will march directly on the canyon, but we will not, of course, take our whole force.”

“What do you mean, ser?”

Arthur went on to explain his plan, which went more or less like this:

The army would split in two. Arthur would take the main force of twenty thousand and head straight for the Galloch Canyon, where they would engage the enemy. The remaining twenty thousand he would leave with Aurion Baltza, who would circle around the canyon on each side before regrouping on the Vilan Plateau. From there, they would immediately march south and hit the enemy from behind.

“I am honored to accept!” declared the courageous commander Baalze, beating his fist to his chest. “They won’t know what hit them.”

Lasie, on the other hand, was doggedly massaging his brow, as was his habit when he was thinking. “You want to split the second force of twenty thousand again to go around the canyon on *both* sides? Not just one?”

“There’s always a chance our enemy will try the same move. But even if they do, they’ll only have a few thousand soldiers. They can’t possibly win. And when they fail to pincer us, they’ll lose even more of what scarce soldiers and morale they have.”

“I follow your reasoning, ser...” Lasie said reluctantly. “But what sort of trap could they even be planning?”

“Knowing that would save us a lot of trouble, but the important thing is that we don’t let the enemy make the first move.”

That the Royal Army had abandoned the forts without a second thought made him think they had a talented commander. And the more talented they

were, the harder they would look for a way out. Just like the surprise attack their enemy planned to spring, Arthur would respond by dangling an opening in front of their nose, as bait—bait so tempting they'd throw their own strategy aside to go after it. Then, when they had gathered like insects to the light of a bonfire, he and Baalze would strike.

When Arthur had explained all this, Lasie said, "I see. So we set a trap of our own and lure them into it."

"It'll be easy to predict how they'll advance so long as we keep the openings limited to set points. Then, once we get them where we want them, it'll be all over. We might even finish them off before Baalze arrives."

"It's possible, depending on how the Royal Army deploys. But even if they're exceptionally cautious and don't take the bait, they'll still end up hemmed in on both sides. A double-layered plan, I suppose."

"Exactly. Whatever happens, it looks like I will soon have good news for Her Majesty."

Aurion Gravis Drake was unaware that Cassandra had made Arthur a secret promise: as soon as he won this battle, he was to be promoted to Aurion Gravis, and given the highest grade of seniority. In other words, Arthur would take Drake's place at the top of the Northern Perscillian Army.

First on the agenda will be clearing out all the old fossils like Drake. And then... Arthur allowed himself an inward smirk.

"—tion was perfect..."

"Eh? What did you say?" Hearing the deserter's voice, Arthur looked over. For some reason there was reverence in the man's eyes.

"Oh, no..." the man said. "I only thought how pitiful the Royal Army seems in comparison to you, my lord. I'm glad I chose to desert." His mouth twisted and he let out a peculiar laugh. There was something about the sound that Arthur found maddening.

The Kaiser Estate in the Sallutonia region of Southern Fernest

“Are you really sure about this?”

After pacing however many times around the room, Margrave Kaiser von Sallutonia, master of a substantial domain in the southwest of Fernest, rounded on a young, handsome officer. A week had passed since Evanson, the officer in question, had arrived with several of his soldiers and rapped on the estate gates. The Northern Perscillan Army had begun its invasion half a month earlier.

“You needn’t worry about that. Major General Olivia might be young, but her understanding of warfare is infallible. I guarantee she will not let you down, Margrave Sallutonia,” Evanson replied confidently, making a courteous bow. Kaiser sank deep into the sofa, then shot a look at the letter that lay on the table. On the envelope, the name *Cornelius vim Gruening* was written in flowing handwriting.

“That—That’s what I’ve been afraid of. A sixteen-year-old girl commanding a legion? Anyone would think you were joking. You can’t just tell me not to worry, as if that were possible...”

In the letter Evanson had carried from his old friend Cornelius, the marshal had written that he placed his unreserved trust in the newly formed Eighth Legion. This was why Kaiser had reluctantly consented to follow the girl’s instructions to withdraw the soldiers stationed at his forts. Under normal circumstances, he never would have considered withdrawing without engaging the invaders even once, and especially not in the domain his ancestors had built and protected through the generations.

“Abandoning the forts will be sure to give our enemy a surprise. Or no—the enemy commander will probably laugh at our outrageous cowardice,” Kaiser said, finishing with a sarcastic laugh of his own.

“I beg your pardon, my lord, but we will return the forts immediately. Withdrawing without fighting is just another part of the art of war.” Evanson scratched his nose, looking embarrassed. “Though that’s just what the Major General told me,” he admitted.

“What that little girl can have to say about the art of war...” Kaiser muttered. “I suppose I ought to take it as another sign that times are changing.”

After many centuries dominated by the ravages of war, one of the most notable distinctions of the current conflict was the number of women serving as soldiers. There were, in fact, many women in Kaiser's own personal guard. He prioritized ability first and foremost without regard for gender, but even he struggled to accept or condone a sixteen-year-old girl on the battlefield, let alone as a legion commander.

However, the dice had been thrown, and there was nothing he could do but leave the rest in the hands of fate. Kaiser reached for a glass filled with red liquid that rested on the table, then drained it.

"Margrave Sallutonia, I know I repeat myself, but you really need not worry. Major General Olivia will rout the Northern Perscillan Army like *that*, you'll see."

"Rout them, eh?" Kaiser said slowly. "You're mighty confident."

"I am. Though I have not known Lady Olivia long, there is no doubt in my mind that she is a trustworthy commander, as her past achievements also attest."

Kaiser had lived through the grasping ambition that ran rampant in noble society by being cutthroat himself. From what he saw, Evanson was undoubtedly a clever fellow. It was in a way inevitable that he found himself growing curious about this girl that inspired something like blind trust in such a man.

Olivia Valedstorm... he thought, looking at his own reflection in the glass. *I'd like to meet this girl they call the Death God and see what she's really made of.*

The battle between the Royal Army and Northern Perscilla was fast approaching.

III

Fort Temes, located in the southernmost reaches of the Kingdom of Fernest, had been built by Raphael sem Galmond as a foothold in the course of his subjugation of the south of the continent. The soldiers stationed at Fort Temes alerted Cornelius to the Northern Perscillan Army's invasion, and thus he gave the order for the Eighth Legion to engage them.

“My lady, the Eighth Legion is ready to move out.”

“Okay, shall we head off then?”

“Before that, ser, a rousing speech would be appreciated.”

Two days after Cornelius’s orders arrived, Olivia mounted the platform at Claudia’s suggestion. She cleared her throat.

“In war, humans die easily. Dying means no more tasty—”

“All salute General Olivia!” Claudia bellowed.

“Huh?!”

At Claudia’s command, the thirty-five thousand soldiers standing in formation saluted as one. Olivia cocked her head, puzzled, and stayed that way as the Eighth Legion marched out of the royal capital accompanied by the passionate cheers of the populace. Two days later, she, along with ten thousand soldiers, were making their way along the Tal Road in the south of Fernest.

It’s the Eighth Legion’s first action, and yet the general isn’t stressed at all, as usual, Claudia thought. While Olivia whispered something to her beloved horse, Comet, Claudia approached her new white steed. It was a purebred of the once famous Adalucillan breed, with a magnificent mane and strong but supple legs. Mentally, they were indefatigable and obedient, which meant they performed brilliantly for a skilled rider. The horse was a gift her grandfather on her mother’s side, Ciel Fendarth, had sent her immediately upon her promotion to lieutenant colonel.

Comet and Kagura, as Olivia had named the white horse, whinnied at one another by way of introduction, swishing their tails. According to Olivia, Kagura was the name of the princess in a book called *The Afternoon Snake Queen*. The princess was usually sweet, but absolutely terrifying when angered. When Claudia asked why she’d chosen the princess’s name for the horse, Olivia only smiled and dodged the question. To her, therefore, it remained a mystery.

Five days after they left Fis, the scouts they’d sent out over the region returned to Claudia and the others. They had just left the Tal Road and were approaching the Galloch Canyon.

“These are our findings, ser. The Northern Perscillan Army is advancing north northwest. At their current pace, they will reach the Galloch Canyon in two days’ time.”

“General.”

“Cool. Sounds like Luke’s done a good job,” Olivia said cheerfully, stroking Comet’s neck.

“So the plan is working?”

“Sounds like it. Only, the enemy commander didn’t try to hold onto the forts they took, so maybe they guessed we’d be in the Galloch Canyon even without Luke feeding them the information. They seem clever. Should we bring them on board?”

“You want to win over the enemy commander?”

“I mean, that’s the easiest way to win,” Olivia joked. Claudia shook her head. In what world would a commander turn traitor in response to an enemy invitation?

“General, I’d appreciate it if you kept away from jokes at a time like this.” With one eye on the new recruits who were looking highly dubious, Claudia went on in a hiss. “If you go any further, it’s going to impact the soldiers’ morale, so please, be discreet.”

Olivia laughed. “Right, sorry.”

“You really are something, Captain Olivia. Even with a full legion assigned to you, it doesn’t weigh on you at all.”

“The general not feeling the weight of things is hardly a new phenomenon,” Claudia pointed out. “And what are you even doing here, Gile?”

Gile was supposed to be in the vanguard, and yet for some reason here he was, nodding beside Claudia as he looked at Olivia with something like divine awe.

“I came to look upon Captain Olivia’s blessed visage, of course. To raise my spirits before the battle, you know. It makes an enormous difference in my morale.”

Claudia sighed while, in the corner of her eye, Olivia pulled a face. “Wow, um. That’s great,” the commander said.

Nothing but oddballs, Claudia thought, *following after their commander’s example*. To Gile, she turned and said, “To raise your spirits? That’s not a reason to break formation without leave, soldier. Is this what you think of military discipline?”

“I don’t believe any reason could be more sufficient, ser,” Gile replied.

“What did you say?! And while we’re here, it’s not ‘captain,’ it’s ‘*general*.’ How long is it going to take for you to correct yourself?”

Gile and Gauss still called Olivia “captain” and, in the direst case of impropriety, Ellis called her “big sister.” By all rights, she should have corrected them, but Olivia didn’t seem bothered at all. Not only that, no sooner had the Eighth Legion set out than Olivia had come up with a “no military formality” order. Discipline had to be considered, so Claudia had dedicated all her powers into convincing Olivia to change her mind, and so here they were.

The new recruits, who didn’t know Olivia, had taken it as a joke to diffuse the tension, but even so Claudia was anxious about what was still to come.

“Oh, yeah. How’s Ashton’s preparation going?”

“We just had an update. Preparations are proceeding smoothly.”

“Doesn’t sound like there are any problems then. Who’s the guard again?”

“You forgot already, ser? The lord marshal lent us Lady Riful.”

“Riful *was* around, now you mention it. Guess it’s fine then.”

Ashton’s importance was fully appreciated not only by Paul, but by Cornelius as well, and the marshal had sent Riful Athene, the First Sword of the Kingdom’s Ten Swords.

Fernest’s Ten Swords weren’t soldiers or knights, but sword fighters—an order of those who had truly mastered the blade. There were exceptions, such as Claudia’s father, Solid Jung, but as a general rule the Swords were not connected to the military. As such, their role was not to use their swords in battle, but only in defense of King Alfonse. They were the king’s absolute final

shield. Cornelius was marshal of the army, so guarding him was one thing. Sending one of the Ten Swords to guard a single major was quite out of the ordinary. As it happened, Riful's sword technique was supposed to be unique amongst the Ten Swords. According to Olivia, who had gotten a real-life look at her bladework, it bore similarities to Rosenmarie's, the commander of the Crimson Knights. She had vouched for Riful, saying her skills were wasted as a guard.

Claudia had no doubt in Olivia's words nor in the ability of Riful the First Sword, but Ashton's life was deeply tied up in this. Before the Eighth Legion's departure, Claudia had asked Riful for a mock duel knowing full well how rude it was, only to be flatly rejected. One could learn a lot from the technique of a highly trained fighter, and many therefore were hostile to their skills being stolen. At first, Claudia thought that this was why Riful had rejected her. Then, she heard that Riful had asked Olivia for a mock duel of her own volition. *Why'd she only reject me?* she'd wondered, a little ruffled, but in the end she hadn't gone so far as to ask why, interpreting it as some sort of line Riful had drawn for herself.

The plan this time means that I can't be with Ashton, she thought, imagining Ashton's nervous smile. *Just stay alive, all right?*

Claudia turned her eyes up to the sky where the clouds raced along just like the era they were living through. Then, she turned to gaze at Olivia, who was stretched out on Comet's back and humming, trust in her eyes.

The Detached Corps, the Vilan Plateau

The Detached Corps was made up of twenty-five thousand soldiers secretly deployed to the Vilan Plateau. Having more or less finished up issuing all his orders, Ashton took a break in the shadow of a tree.

"Ashton..."

"Wh-What is it?" He saw tied-back black hair and vacant, pale violet eyes. Riful was pretty, it was safe to say, and she wore a brightly colored tunic over her armor.

I'm pretty sure the Tohka she's wearing was the battle garb of the Ullu Tribe,

who died out ages back. I wonder if that means Riful is descended from the Ullu? Ashton thought, looking at Riful with a healthy dose of unease in his expression. But despite suddenly calling out to him from behind him, Riful only stood there absently. Ashton's wariness was only natural when this kept happening.

The silence stretched out.

"U-Um. Did you need something?" Ashton asked again, thinking, *Still not talking, huh?* Riful slowly blinked heavily a few times, then in a flash, she drew her sword. The action was so dissonant with her depression that Ashton was totally taken aback.

"Wanna...see my sword fighting?"

"Huh?"

"Wanna see?" Riful repeated. Then, she set off towards a mighty tree that looked well over a hundred years old. After the first surprise that they'd exchanged proper words, Ashton's eyes went even wider at her proposal to show him her bladework.

"You'll show me?" he asked.

"Yeah..." Riful replied with a nod. She looked up at the dense green canopy. Lately, Ashton had been entirely neglecting his sword practice for the simple reason that absolutely everyone insisted to him that it was a waste of his time. As it would have been catastrophically dangerous to leave him to protect himself, it was reassuring having a strong guard by his side at all times. Having said that, the fact was that although Ashton knew of the Ten Swords, he had no idea of what that meant for Riful's actual ability. It was his life at stake here, so he was only too happy for her to show him, for future reference. Ashton did have one question, however.

"Only, I heard you didn't agree to a mock duel with Lieutenant Colonel Claudia."

"Claudia's sword...still below mine. But there's still room...to grow. So no showing. No way." She finished by holding her arms up in a big X and made a strange buzzing noise.

In other words, she won't show her hand to anyone who might become a rival in the future? I do understand Special Officer Riful's thinking, but still... The face of a girl with a carefree smile ran through Ashton's mind.

"Hold on. You showed Olivia, didn't you?"

"Yeah. I...did. Great Master Olivia—"

"Wait, wait a second."

"Wh...What?"

"Did you just say, 'Great Master Olivia'?" Ashton cut in without thinking, wondering how Olivia had picked up the title of "Great Master" all of a sudden.

Riful answered robotically. "I did. Great Master Olivia. She...Ultra Master Olivia's sword fighting is on a whole different level. She and I are...different. Fundamentally. So...I showed her. Or more like...she let me. She really is worthy of the name...Death God."

"Er, is there a reason you just changed from Great Master to Ultra Master Olivia?"

"I don't know...what you mean," Riful said, cocking her head. If this were Claryss, Ashton's senior from the Royal Lion Academy, he would've known she was teasing him, but it wasn't.

"I don't think I said anything that complicated..." Ashton replied. "But, okay. I understand why you showed your bladework to Olivia."

"I'm...glad," Riful said, with a small smile like a budding flower.

Ashton, who had seen Olivia's strength up close, had no objections to what she said. Having said that, if he were honest, something about "a whole different level" didn't sit right with him. This was surely another sign of his lack of talent as a warrior. He realized he was wearing an ironic smile.

"Then let me ask again. Are you sure you don't mind showing me?"

"Yeah..." Riful said. "Ashton is...OK!" She looked quickly away and then, with a shimmy, made an "o" shape with her hand. Ashton was seized by the strong yet poorly defined sense that he was being made fun of.

“Right... I’ll show you. Watch out for...falling leaves!” She slid her right foot forwards, dropping into her stance; then, before Ashton knew what was happening, she threw a kick off her left. She was supple and struck with force incongruous with her slight frame. There was a resonant thud that Ashton felt in his stomach as the tree shook and a cloud of leaves came flurrying down. Ashton looked at the leaves, just as Riful had told him.

“The butterfly’s...dance.” Riful faced the leaves and made a few intermittent strikes with her blade. “That’s...all,” she said. Then, she slowly returned her sword to its scabbard. Ashton looked down at the ground and saw that every leaf without exception had been cut perfectly in half. Even Ashton could tell this was a display that necessitated an outstanding level of skill. That was when he knew that the Ten Swords were more than just a title.

“We...ell? Do you...feel better?” Riful said, coming up behind Ashton who was transfixed by the leaves. He turned and saw she was making an odd gesture.

“I mean, I wasn’t worried from the start,” Ashton replied. “By the way, what’s that?”

“Was I...cool?”

“Um?” Ashton gaped for a moment, then, averting his eyes slightly, said, “U-Um, yes. I think you were cool.”

“The other swords say I’m...weird. You have...good taste. I...like you. And you’re...actually kind of...cute.” As Riful spoke, she came up beside Ashton and rubbed his arm like an old lady would.

Carefully extricating himself from her, he said, “W-Well, thank you.”

“You’re...welcome.” Riful nodded, looking pleased. Then, in the blink of an eye, she’d vanished into the trees. Right after, Gauss appeared as if to replace her.

“Was that the girl from the Ten Swords?” he asked, looking over at the trees.

“Yeah.”

“Hmm. She doesn’t look it at all...” Gauss rubbed his chin then, suddenly, he grinned.

“What’s the smile about?” Ashton asked.

“Ah, well. It just set me thinking, you know, what Lieutenant Colonel Claudia would think if she saw what happened just now.”

“Lieutenant Colonel Claudia?” Ashton repeated. “Oh, that she’s a bad match for me? You don’t have to worry about *that*.” He scratched his nose, embarrassed.

He’d been getting a lot of invitations from female soldiers lately. As a man, Ashton obviously wasn’t displeased by these expressions of interest, but he still turned them all down, citing the war as a reason. It was also a great help having Claudia there to beat them back at the threshold, insisting that nothing could get in the way of his duties.

“Yeah, I didn’t mean it quite like that...”

“Then what *did* you mean by it?” Ashton asked again, unable to fathom what Gauss was getting at. Seeing the state of his superior officer, a pitying look came into Gauss’s eyes.

“You’ll excuse me saying it to you as my superior officer, but you are still so young,” Gauss said. “It’s all very well being single-minded, but you ought to give some attention to flowers that bloom quietly off to one side, not just the big, bright ones.”

“Flowers...?” Ashton repeated. “I really have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Gauss scratched his head hopelessly. “Oh, well...” he said, then his demeanor changed, and he saluted. “Anyway, I have a report. The units are all in position.”

“R-Right. Thank you.” Though still completely lost at sea, Ashton returned the salute, and without another word, the two of them turned to observe the soldiers.

Abruptly, Gauss said soberly, “It’s strange though. This is our first battle with the United City-States of Sutherland, and yet I’m not nervous at all...”

“That doesn’t sound like you, Second Lieutenant.”

Gauss repeated the same words to his troops every day: “Great warriors are

always vigilant, even when their opponent is down. When you're not vigilant, you open yourself up to attack, and that's how you get yourself killed."

As Ashton stared at him, he said unabashedly, "It's because I trust you, Major Ashton."

Ashton was confident in their current plan too, but that always came with unease. While Ashton floundered to come up with a reply to that, Gauss patted him on the back with his large, heavy palm. The impact came with force fitting Gauss's size, and Ashton was sent toppling forwards.

"What the—!" he exclaimed between coughs. Gauss chuckled.

"You don't have to eat as much as Captain Olivia, but you should put a little more meat on your bones, Major Ashton," he said. "Anyway, my troops are waiting for me. I'd better leave you here." He made another salute, which Ashton hastily returned. Now there was no telling which of them was the superior officer. To an outsider, Gauss probably looked like the superior.

Well, it's hardly news that I don't have any authority.

"Oh, about that strange stuff you said before—" Ashton called out, but Gauss walked away without looking back. *What was he trying to tell me?* Ashton wondered. But he wasn't given time to mull over Gauss's words. Not long afterwards, scouts arrived to announce that the battle had begun.

IV

Main Command of the Northern Perscillan Army, the Galloch Canyon

It was a few hours after hostilities had broken out between the Eighth Legion and the Northern Perscillan Army in the Galloch Canyon. The reports that rolled in on the state of the battle caused a dramatic improvement in the energy of the assembled officers.

"It's clear from the current situation just what sort of a state the Royal Army is in, eh?"

"Still, this feels cruel. We have them on numbers, but while they have the advantage of terrain, they have the discipline of a bunch of toddlers. I can't help

but think those reports that they beat two orders of the empire's knights must have been mere fabrication." Lasie's face twisted with pure disgust as he spoke. His observations were correct. The Royal Army lacked anything even remotely resembling discipline. Their counter to the Northern Perscillan attack had come without any order. Forget lions; they fought worse than puppies.

"There's a simple answer to your doubts, Lasie," Arthur said.

Lasie paused, then asked, "Would you be so kind as to tell me what it is, ser?"

"You don't see it? We're fighting an *entirely different opponent* now."

"Different..." Lasie repeated slowly. "Was it the Invincible General who defeated the knight orders?"

"That's what I think."

The Kurca Annihilation Strategy, deployed by Cornelius the Invincible General in his battle with Lemuria, continued to be used as an example of warfare in the present day. In the absence of any rumors of the man's death, Arthur was sure that Cornelius must have been responsible for driving off the Crimson and the Helios Knights.

"Why isn't he here this time, then?"

"Even the Invincible General won't have emerged unscathed from fighting those two armies. Otherwise they wouldn't send an army that fights like newly hatched chicks."

Lasie processed this. "Should we simply crush them, then? For want of a better way to put it, I don't think we will need our plan after all."

"I see why you'd think so. They're far more woeful than anything I expected."

"Then—"

"So we draw them into the trap, and cut them to pieces."

The imperial army had retreated for now, but it would undoubtedly be back. It was hard to imagine the Royal Army could take on two enemies at once in its current state. If Arthur beat them thoroughly here, the Royal Army would have no other force available to send against him, which would secure him time to establish their newly acquired domain. If he took the nobles' assets and

distributed them to the impoverished commoners, they would quietly submit to his regime. Commoners were more concerned with the money and food they needed to live than the fate of nations, after all.

“Shall we get started, then?”

“But ser, *deliberately* creating an opening amongst all this will be a nightmare...” Just as Lasie was expressing his misgivings, a new runner came dashing in.

“My lords! The Royal Army is retreating!”

At this, Arthur and Lasie turned unconsciously to look at each other.

“Commander,” Lasie said at length.

“Quite the performance they’ve put on for us,” Arthur laughed. He went on laughing, his mouth twisting. A bad comedy wouldn’t try such a development. A retreat only a few hours after the battle commenced was a turn even Arthur hadn’t seen coming. *I see how they got trampled by the empire. Here the downfall of Fernest is epitomized.* He no longer had any doubt that they would win. Yet despite that, the wasted effort weighed on him.

“We’ll shift to pursue the enemy,” Lasie said cautiously.

“Yes, do so. Lady Cassandra wants an absolute victory. Tell the soldiers to slaughter them all. Take no prisoners alive.”

“Yes, ser.”

“Oh, and I give my word: whoever kills the enemy commander, no matter their rank, will be promoted to argerion.”

“Thank you, ser!”

Main Command of the Eighth Legion

“General, our forces are being overwhelmed.”

Looking down from above, the Eighth Legion was getting pushed unrelentingly back, unable to effectively make use of the advantage of terrain. Unless the course of the battle changed, the Eighth Legion would soon burn

through what little life it had left.

“Yeah,” said legion commander Olivia complacently, as though it didn’t have much to do with her. But neither Claudia nor any of the others reproached her for it. Everything was going just as she’d planned.

“Speaking of,” she added, taking out a pocket watch and opening it, “it’s about time we finished this, isn’t it?”

“If all goes well, that is...” Claudia said. No sooner had she spoken than a runner appeared, panting. They were from Ashton’s Detached Corps.

“How is it going?”

“Perfectly, ser. Major Ashton ordered us to move onto the final stage of the plan.”

Claudia broke into a smile. If she’d been alone, she might have danced. Even without her and Olivia, Ashton had pulled off his vital role with great success.

“General! Ashton’s done it!”

“That’s the Eighth Legion’s tactician for you. We’ve got this battle pretty much in the bag now.” Humming to herself, Olivia took a cookie from the bag at her waist and popped it into her mouth. Claudia caught a faint whiff of sugar, totally incongruous with the battlefield around them.

“I’ll give the order to retreat at once.”

“Thanks. But seriously, everyone is so good at acting! The enemy actually thinks our army is falling apart.” Olivia was visibly impressed. Claudia sighed. Things were proceeding according to the scenario they had planned for, but it was questionable whether what the new recruits were doing could be called acting. They had, of course, communicated the contents of the plan to the whole legion, but when faced with the real enemy, all they could do was blindly swing with spears and swords. They had their hands full just staying alive.

Still, I suppose this is the general we’re talking about. She probably thought of all that.

Though she was only sixteen years old, no one came close to Olivia’s skill with a sword. On top of that, she had an extraordinary head for warfare, and her

beauty seemed to have taken on an even higher degree of refinement of late. On more than a few occasions, Claudia had found herself seriously wondering if some god hadn't crafted her for a bit of amusement. Though Ellis, if allowed a word in, would scoff at the idea of a mere *god* being able to create Olivia.

"We should get going too," Olivia said. She stood up from her chair, which Gile had built himself, her cloak billowing. The crimson cloak that Ellis had gifted her upon her promotion stood out even more dramatically paired with her ebony armor. Black roses, a skull, and two crossed scythes were drawn in its center, rimmed in white. Needless to say, this was the crest of the House of Valedstorm.

First Ashton, now Ellis with these absurd, unnecessary gestures. Now everyone's just going to compare her to a God of Death even more than they did before. As Claudia cursed them internally, Olivia came up with a pure smile. "Do you think it suits me?" she asked.

If that were the question, Claudia thought it *suit*ed her something fierce. But rather than admit it, she said, "I'm afraid I've never liked the Valedstorm crest..."

It was the crest that had given the association with the name "Death God" to Olivia. Claudia could never bring herself to like it. If she'd known things would end up as they were today, she would have physically prevented Olivia from taking the Valedstorm name. But the future could only be guessed at, never known. And now the damage was done.

"You hate it, don't you?" Olivia said, looking at the crest on her chest with a little laugh.

"It's just that a crest that makes everyone think of death bodes nothing but ill..."

"But death doesn't mean the end. Even when your physical form ceases activity, your sleeping soul is purified at the Zero Boundary. Then, it's bound for a new life. So life and death are basically just two sides of the same coin," Olivia concluded in a teacherly tone. There was a tint of longing in her eyes.

The common story is that you go to the Land of the Dead when you die. I've never heard of this "Zero Boundary" she mentioned. I suppose this is another

thing she learned from that Z person...?

Olivia had told her about Z, the self-proclaimed “Death God” who had raised her. With the sword skills that Olivia said Z had drilled into her until they became second nature, any one of her blows was lethal, and it was common knowledge that this terrified the imperials. Considering the level Olivia had been trained to, Z adopting the title didn’t seem unreasonable. *Still, wasn’t there any other way to put it?* Claudia thought as she issued commands for the troops to retreat in order.

Olivia was on the front line with the rear guard, issuing orders lightning-quick to enable her soldiers to withdraw. Amidst this, she turned to Claudia, who was beside her issuing her own commands. “Tell Gile to concentrate his attacks on that enemy unit exposed on their right flank,” she said.

“Very well. I will send a runner at once.” While Claudia organized the runner, Olivia stuck her hand into her bag and pulled out Comet’s favorite snack. She began to feed the horse, who munched away happily.

“General, must you do that now?” Claudia said.

“But Comet says they’re hungry.” The horse swished its tail and gave a high-pitched whinny. “That’s what you said, isn’t it?”

“Forgive me, ser, but I don’t understand Comet’s language,” Claudia said, thinking to herself that more to the point, it was normal not to understand *horse*. Olivia gave her a distressed look, but Claudia felt like quite frankly she was the one being distressed here.

“Well, it’d be a shame not to learn it, now that you have Kagura,” Olivia said. “Right, Kagura?”

Kagura nodded her head and Claudia very nearly found herself subjected to the ignominy of tumbling from the horse’s back. Resettling herself in her saddle, she looked at Olivia straight on. “Let’s concentrate on the battle at hand, General.”

“When was I not concentrating?” Olivia said, feeding some snacks to Kagura as well. Claudia’s disapproval for this lighthearted attitude showed on her face,

but the soldiers who had served under her from the beginning were used to it. It gave them a sense of comfort, like the safety of a mother's embrace.

First Company of Olivia's Rear Guard

"There's a message from General Olivia. We're to concentrate our attacks on the enemy's exposed right flank."

"Very good." Gile was greatly cheered by Olivia's orders. "Listen well! These are the divine words of our valkyrie!"

"Yes, ser!" the soldiers chorused.

"The unit on the enemy's right flank is exposed! It is her will that we should concentrate our attack on them. Which means, my Thousand Star Archers, that your moment has come!"

"Yes, ser!" The unit of longbow archers, trained by Gile, moved seamlessly into position. Their bows creaked as they pointed them up at the sky and pulled the strings taut. A soldier with a spyglass immediately began to estimate the enemy's precise distance.

"Three hundred meters... One hundred... Eighty... The enemy is within effective bow range."

"Commence three-stage volley!" The captain gave the command and a cloud of arrows shot off, raining down unrelenting on the front-most ranks of the enemy force that thundered towards them. Gile then pressed forwards with three hundred more soldiers. The enemy was thrown into disarray and left entirely at the mercy of Gile's force, who dispatched them one after another to the land of the dead.

"Hey, keep moving! Don't tell me you can't handle a few hundred soldiers!" bellowed Argerion Petrus Golan from horseback. He had command of the vanguard. He deflected the incoming arrows with his shield as he berated his wavering comrades.

"But ser, they're nothing like the enemy soldiers we've fought so far!" protested Golan's advisor, his face pale.

“What’s your point? This is no more than a last, desperate resistance.”

“But—”

“Enough chat. The only way is forwards!” Golan was just about to spur his horse forwards when, through the billowing dust, his eyes met those of another man. With a smirk, the man swiftly nocked an arrow.

“Eh?!” The arrow flew straight and true towards a point below Golan. “You won’t get me that easy!” His sword flashed down and the arrow clattered to the ground without touching him.

Wh...What?! Another one already?! A second arrow, following precisely the same path as the first, shot towards Golan’s face. He couldn’t cut it aside, couldn’t even dodge as it skewered him through the neck. For a moment, Golan stared blankly at the shaft protruding before him. Then, vomiting up a great torrent of blood, he toppled from his horse.

Surrounded by screams like shattering glass, Gile shouted, “The enemy commander is dead! Now push them back!”

The ground shook with the intensity of his soldiers’ courageous voices as they answered him. Gile didn’t let up his attack, even as he continued to issue commands. He deftly nocked arrow after arrow, dispatching enemy soldiers with his keen aim. By this point, he’d very nearly perfected the technique that would see his name go down in history as a master archer.

The words he spoke that day—“It is not skill nor weapons that set an arrow in flight, but spirit!”—were to become wildly famous, but what was not widely known was that his speech was recorded incorrectly. “It is not skill nor weapons that set an arrow in flight, but the will of the valkyrie!” was the actual nonsense that came out of his mouth.

“Hey! No time for dillydallying!” At a sharp voice from behind him, Gile turned. There, he saw a woman with her boot pressing down on an enemy soldier who lay on the ground, looking anguished, just as she ran her longsword through his throat. She drew back the blade, then flicked the blood off to the ground.

“Ellis...” Gile said, easing his hand from the knife at his right hip. “So the Second Company is heading in...” Ellis’s eyes followed him as he immediately set about recovering his arrows from the bodies strewn around them.

“Guess you’re being careful, huh?”

“Careful? Are you serious? This is the Eighth Legion’s first action, the beginning of its legend. I will do whatever it takes to ensure I don’t bring shame upon Captain Olivia.”

His quiver full once more with bloodstained arrows, Gile checked the tension of his bowstring with exacting precision. Ellis snorted.

“I know that, obviously. We’ve stopped them for now, but it’s going to take time to get the whole army to retreat. We have to make sure Olivia’s plan goes perfectly—so you’d better be ready to go, Gile.”

“Indeed. You too, Ellis.” They exchanged a look, then smiled fiercely.

In one smooth gesture, Gile nocked another arrow, then took aim at the approaching enemy. Ellis, her mouth quirking, set off at a run, her body so low she seemed to skim along the ground.

After a few hours of battle, Olivia’s rear guard succeeded in forcing the enemy’s whole force to fall back. To Arthur’s great consternation, they now made brilliant use of the terrain of the canyon, exploiting it to its full potential. But he was already convinced of his victory, and so dismissed it as a last-ditch resistance without giving it significant thought.

V

Baltza’s Army, the Vilan Plateau

A short while earlier...

Baltza’s forces were on alert for the enemy’s detached force, but they did not encounter them as they passed through the Olstoy Forest and the Calbadia Hills to rendezvous at the Vilan Plateau. As he proceeded with the reorganization of his forces, Aurion Baltza felt a strange sense of foreboding and without thinking,

looked around.

Nothing out of the ordinary, he thought. He couldn't see as much as he might have thanks to the densely growing alpine plants, but the landscape before him was perfectly idyllic. There was nothing there to inspire anxiety. He had already had word that in the battle underway in the Galloch Canyon before them, the Northern Perscillan Army was utterly dominating their opponent. After he caught them in a pincer from behind, their victory would be as good as decided...yet his anxiety was not allayed.

"You've had that gloomy look on your face for a while now, ser. Is something the matter?"

"I'm not sure myself," Baltza replied, disgruntled. His advisor, Noutalias, gave him a doubtful look but said no more. If he'd had to name something in particular that felt off, it was that it was too quiet. This wasn't the kind of quiet that set your heart at ease, but rather that which stirred up fear.

"You're not worried about an ambush, are you, ser?" Noutalias asked. His face was stiff, but there was levity in his voice. Besides him, too, there was an air of insouciance about all the soldiers. They were all sure that the battle would end in their victory.

"Just because we have the advantage doesn't mean we can relax. The Royal Army will be desperate as a cornered rat, and there's no telling what a desperate man will try. That sort of thing can catch you off guard." As he lectured Noutalias, the word "ambush" that the man had used earlier settled like a stone in his stomach. Everything seemed to fall into place as he considered that this sense of foreboding might be a sign that the enemy were about to appear.

We haven't seen hide nor hair of them thus far, so it's safe to say they won't catch us from behind. Even if that detached force is lurking somewhere, they can't have more than a few thousand soldiers, like Lord Arthur said. Even if that prediction falls short, they can't possibly number more than ten thousand. And besides, if they have a solid force, the conventional thing to do would be to gather them in the Galloch Canyon. This must all be my imagination. With that in mind, Baltza surveyed his surroundings once more, but found nothing

changed. The only thing he noticed was a gray rabbit poking its head out of the undergrowth with a bemused expression.

Still, anything could happen. Better tell the troops to be on heightened alert.

Just as Baltza called over a runner to relay his orders, there came the panicked cries from the soldiers in front that, before he knew it, had propagated all around him.

“What’s going on?!” he shouted. Before Noutalias could reply, Baltza saw the hail of arrows descending upon them. Right away, he drew his sword and bellowed at the paralyzed soldiers, “Don’t panic! Get into a defensive form—” His command was cut short as, from all sides, the soldiers’ screams echoed through the air.

“Many enemies on the left flank!”

“They’re on the right flank too!”

“They came from behind, out of nowhere!”

“Lord Baltza! We’re being attacked on all sides!”

“Impossible. How could they get into position so fast?!” Even if the Royal Army had been lying in wait for the perfect moment, it wouldn’t explain this speed. The first thought that came to Baltza was that it was as though they’d been beset by Gollams, those swift-footed creatures of myth.

“—Itza! Lord Baltza!” Noutalias’s desperate shouts brought him back to the scene at hand. “Our force is in total disarray! What are your orders?!”

“R-Right now, get into a defensive formation! There can’t be that many of them!” he replied. But Baltza couldn’t have been more wrong in this prediction. The ambushing force he’d thought could only number a few thousand at most swelled before his eyes, until they found themselves surrounded by over twenty thousand soldiers.

And that wasn’t all.

Alongside the scarlet lion banners of Fernest, there flew another banner, one that provoked an unspeakable terror in him. It was black, with roses red as blood, a white skull, and two crossed scythes. The wind that swept up to them

from the bottom of the canyon set the sea of black banners flying spectacularly.

You've got some nerve, bringing out those disgusting banners! Trying to break our spirits, are you? They were vastly outnumbered, and already, the difference in morale was starkly apparent. Baltza shouted himself hoarse trying to at least knock them out of their funk, but his cries seemed to fall on deaf ears. Surveying his soldiers, he saw that the black banners had more than achieved their desired effect. There was nothing so vulnerable as an army caught unawares, as their current predicament amply demonstrated. It was made even worse by the fact that all of them—even Baltza—had believed without reservation that the battle was all but won.

"I can't believe they hid twenty thousand soldiers..." Noutalias said. "The Royal Army totally outfoxed us."

"Apparently, Lord Arthur and I both were too ready to dismiss them..." Realizing how foolish he'd been, Baltza clenched his jaw so hard he thought his teeth might shatter.

It was two hours after the ambush.

"What's the state of the battle?"

"We've got nearly all the chaos under control. Only, they're still overpowering us. Ser, I think we ought to retreat, with all possible haste..."

"Did you say 'retreat,' Noutalias?"

"Yes, ser."

"You make the worst jokes I've ever heard. Where do you think we can retreat to?" Baltza made a show of peering around them, his mouth twisting. He didn't need Noutalias to tell him to retreat. If it were possible, he would have long since commanded it. In fact, he'd considered it the moment they were ambushed. But in the blink of an eye, all paths to escape had been closed off, leaving them no choice but to hold their ground. That was the only reason they were in this predicament.

They've got us near to perfectly surrounded. Even a tactical genius couldn't find a way out of this, he thought. *Nothing to do now but have as many of their*

soldiers as I can join me on the journey to the next world. The only thing he couldn't abide was humiliating himself as the commander of an army.

Baltza gripped his sword, and had resolved himself to an honorable death, when a joyful voice rang out.

"Lord Baltza! Look at that!" cried a petrion. Baltza pointed his spyglass in the direction they indicated and saw the enemy force falling back like the retreating tide. He found himself gripping the spyglass hard.

"That's Ferrion Olga's unit..." he murmured.

"Lord Baltza, this is the chance we've been waiting for. We might just be able to retreat!" Noutalias said breathlessly. This was so undeniable it scarcely needed to be said. It still represented the height of disgrace, but it was better than annihilation. Baltza gave the command at once.

"We attempt a retreat through the point where the enemy's formation is broken. Get word to Olga with all haste."

"Yes, ser!"

Main Command of the Detached Corps

"Major, the enemy's right flank is circling around to the north."

"To the front of the Eurass River..." Ashton said to himself. "Send the Seventh Platoon—but don't forget to tell Sergeant Thomas that he is under no circumstances to cross the river and attack."

"Yes, ser!"

"Major Ashton, Agatha from the Third Company—"

"Is here to say that our ring is stretched thin on the left flank, is that right?"

"Y-Yes, exactly, ser."

"Tell her not to worry, I've already sent two platoons."

"Yes...Yes, ser! I'll pass it to the runners."



Ashton continued to issue commands with such precision he might have been a bird looking down on the battlefield from the sky.

Like a god using humans as playing pieces on a chess board...

After the negotiations with Margrave Sallutonia concluded, Evanson had joined Ashton as his chief of staff. Now, he stared at the other man in awe.

A runner came up to them and said, "The enemy is concentrating its attacks on Second Lieutenant Gauss's unit. The second lieutenant has begun to retreat and is heading for the agreed location."

At this, the officers all started talking excitedly.

"The enemy seems to have gone for the bait, Major Ashton," said one, beaming.

"It seems so. Well, whether to retreat entirely or to fall back and regroup, they were always going to want to find a way out of this situation, so it's only natural, really."

"But the way they always act just as you predict," Evanson replied, "there's something kind of scary about it."

"If our opponent had some sort of aesthetic fixation on death, that would be a different story, but otherwise it's inevitable that they'd go straight for a way out once they found it. If I were in their shoes, I expect I'd run straight for it," he said drolly, closing one eye. *Would you really, though?* Evanson thought, privately doubtful. After all the feats Ashton had pulled off, there was no way he'd be hooked so easily. Evanson was sure that he acted only after predicting every eventuality.

Olivia's presence was so blinding that Ashton tended to get hidden in her shadow, but as far as Evanson was concerned, his achievements were in no way inferior to hers. Though if he ever said so, Ashton himself would undoubtedly put all his energy into refuting it.

"By the way, there hasn't been any word from Olivia, has there?" There was a probing look in Ashton's eyes as he asked that was only too easy to discern.

"No reports as of yet. Worried?" Evanson couldn't help smirking a little.

“Is something funny?”

“Oh, no. I just thought worrying about General Olivia seems needless.”

“True. If anything, the others are probably worried about us. Lieutenant Colonel Claudia in particular kept shooting me anxious glances,” Ashton said, then scratched the back of his neck.

“Strange to think it, but you might be right.” Evanson gave a little shrug, wondering absently if Lieutenant Claudia was aware of her own feelings, in the end.

“Anyway, I’m sure Second Lieutenant Gauss will make sure everything progresses according to plan.”

“Right, you wouldn’t think it to look at him, but he’s got a knack for performance.”

Ashton went to the runners who stood at the ready and informed them that the plan was entering its final stage. They set off in all directions, with swiftness born of much training.

As he went on issuing new commands, Evanson watched from behind, his eyes full of trust.

Olga’s Battalion, Baltza’s Army

“The enemy’s running scared! Keep going and break through!”

Olga’s battalion had pursued the retreating Royal Army as far as the Pass of Toledo to the northwest of the Vilan Plateau.

Sitting astride his steed, Ferrion Olga bellowed at his troops while thrusting violently with his shortspear at the royal soldiers. They responded with a roar, spurring one another on, and the discordant clamor of the battlefield rang out.

The Pass of Toledo, red under the light of the setting sun, was filled by the soldiers of the Northern Perscillan Army, now on the offensive, and the Royal Army that fell further and further back.

“Ferrion Olga, there’s an urgent message from Aurion Baltza!”

“From Lord Baltza?” Olga pulled hard on his reins to bring his horse to a stop, glaring at his advisor Marseille. “Tell me.”

“Yes, ser. He says, ‘Continue to push the enemy back, and swiftly secure a path to retreat.’”

“A path to *retreat*?” Olga exclaimed. “It can’t be!”

Marseilles lowered his head. “I am afraid so, ser. Aurion Baltza has ordered that the whole army is to retreat.”

“Humbug! Retreating, when we’ve finally opened a crack in the Royal Army’s defense? Baltza must’ve taken leave of his senses!”

Consumed by fury, Olga gored another fleeing royal soldier with his shortspear. They spasmed violently and quickly died.

Sweat beaded on Marseille’s brow. “Right now, our unit is the only one with the upper hand. The rest are all surrounded and at risk of being wiped out. I think Aurion Baltza’s order is the correct course...”

Olga made a noise of disgust. “Useless cowards, the lot of you!” Another royal soldier took a courageous thrust at him with their spear. He avoided the blow, then without apparent effort, seized the soldier by the scruff of the neck and turned his horse to beat them relentlessly against a nearby boulder.

“Scum!” He released his blood-splattered fist, and the soldier, their face no longer recognizable as human, collapsed over the boulder as if to embrace it. Marseille stared in shocked silence. Olga turned to him, panting. “Don’t worry. I’m not about to disobey an order.” Olga was well aware that it was irrational to expect two thousand soldiers to win against a force more than ten times their number. It left a bitter taste in his mouth, but he tried to alter his perspective. It was clear that he would get the credit if he successfully secured their way to retreat, which would surely improve Arthur’s estimation of him. Olga’s brain raced to calculate how he could work this to his advantage.

“The retreat is already underway. That’s right, isn’t it?”

“Undoubtedly, ser.”

“Then we’ll drive the enemy back to support the retreat. Pass that along to

the others.”

“Yes, ser!”

The Main Force of Baltza’s Army

“If we fall back here, we’ll finally reach the Toledo Road...” Baltza looked out at the town, no more than specks in the distance, and sighed. Already, more than half of his soldiers lay behind him, their final resting places unmarked, but thanks to Olga opening them a path, it looked as though they would avoid total annihilation.

The sun had set, and now all that illuminated the Pass of Toledo was the faint silver light of the moon. Perhaps because of the extreme limitation this exerted on their vision, at that moment, the Royal Army’s pursuit had stalled. *If they attack again, it’ll be tomorrow morning*, thought Baltza. *In the meantime, I’d like to put as much distance between us as possible. But the soldiers’ fatigue is showing.*

Even through the darkness, the exhaustion was plain on the faces of the marching soldiers.

You don’t feel it so much when you’re winning; it’s when you’re losing that the exhaustion hits you. I’ll let them rest a little...

Noutalias’s scream cut through the darkness, catching Baltza in the instant he allowed himself to relax.

“F-F-Flaming arrows!”

Baltza’s gaze was drawn up. He saw a great mass of flaming arrows raining down from the cliffs on either side of them. They had been caught entirely unawares, but even here, Baltza’s judgment was unerring.

“Cluster together, raise your shields above your heads!” he shouted. For a second, the soldiers stood frozen, but then they sprang into action, covering their heads with their shields. These were the ones who had survived this far, after all; they were shaken, but their discipline was unwavering. The burning arrows that descended upon them like shooting stars bounced harmlessly off their iron shields, sending the clang of metal on metal echoing around the pass.

As the noise filled his ears, Baltza was consumed by questions.

There's only one road through the Toledo Pass, he thought. The Royal Army was behind us—how are they attacking us from the front?

But just as the flaming arrows subsided, the question dissipated from his mind. He had just seen the great boulders tumbling towards them, raising an earth-shaking rumble. *They even planned this?!* he thought. Iron shields would do nothing against boulders.

“Lord Baltzaaa!”

“Help! Help me!”

Desperate cries ricocheted around the pass, but there was nothing Baltza could do. His soldiers were swept aside and pulverized under the oncoming rocks. Those who died instantly were the lucky ones. One went on dragging himself along the ground, calling for help without realizing that his legs were ruined. It didn't take Baltza long to realize that it was his advisor, Noutalias.

It's over now, he thought. Melissa, Benrick, I was a fool. Forgive me for dying here...

His grip slackened, and he dropped his sword. As he stared at the boulder that thundered towards him, the faces of his wife and their infant son flashed before his mind's eye.

Gauss's Regiment, the Detached Corps

The wind caught the screams of the enemy soldiers so that they resonated even at the top of the cliffs, while a scene out of hell unfolded at the base. Gauss was watching in silence when Private First-Class Smerry, seemingly one of the more promising new recruits, came up to him and performed a clumsy salute.

“Captain Gauss, the enemy have lost all will to fight! Our victory is assured!”

“Don't let up yet. Major Ashton wants a bloodbath.”

“A...A bloodbath, ser?!” Smerry said, a hysterical note in his voice.

“That's right. He wants the Pass of Toledo dyed red with the blood of our

enemies.”

“I-I see. Understood, ser.” Gauss saw Smerry gulp and felt inwardly gleeful. Obviously, Ashton would never have given such a horrifying order. Gauss had simply made it up. To a soldier, Ashton inspired no deep impression, whether good or bad. Olivia had been the same at first. But where one look at Olivia in battle was sufficient to remedy this, the same wasn’t true for Ashton. From the start, Smerry here and the other new recruits had shown a propensity for thinking little of Ashton. Gauss was, in other words, bolstering his reputation.

Ashton would no doubt have a thing or two to say if he ever caught wind of it, but Gauss reassured himself that such measures were necessary for the sake of the Eighth Legion. He wasn’t just terrorizing the new recruits for his own amusement.

“Incidentally, Major Ashton has requested individual reports on all the recruits whose performance isn’t up to snuff. Know why that is?”

“I don’t, ser,” Smerry said tremulously. “Will you tell me?”

“Ah, well, it’s only natural a fresh recruit like you wouldn’t know,” Gauss said with an exaggerated drawl. “Everyone who fails to meet Major Ashton’s expectations is sent to the ‘experiment chamber,’ no exceptions.”

“The e-experiment chamber? What’s the experiment chamber?”

“Even I don’t know the details. But going off the name, they’re running some kind of experiment...maybe even human experiments. You might not think it, but Major Ashton’s got a bent for scholarly inquiry.” Gauss finished with a menacing chuckle.

“Human experiments? SSurely not,” Smerry said, laughing nervously.

“Well, you saw how he didn’t blink at setting dusksight wolves—a class one dangerous beast, might I add—on the new recruits. Maybe human experimentation is an exaggeration, but something of that nature’s lying in wait there, make no mistake.”

“Wait a minute. It was General Olivia who set the wolves on the new recruits, wasn’t it? At least, that’s what I heard.”

“Eh? No, that’s not right. It was Major Ashton who first suggested it to the general.”

Gauss was well aware that Ashton had been joking, of course. But he wasn’t about to tell the new recruits that. The truth wasn’t always the thing to lead someone down the correct path.

“I was sure it was General Olivia...”

“He was rubbing his hands together with glee talking about how well the dusksight wolves would train up the new recruits.”

Smerry’s face went pale. Gauss gave him a few reassuring pats on the shoulder.

“Now, I wonder if Major Ashton will be satisfied with how you’ve performed today.”

“Th-Thank you, ser!” Smerry practically fled from Gauss. It wouldn’t take long for the story to spread amongst the recruits. Nothing spread like information people thought could harm them.

“Should you really be saying those things, Captain?” A soldier, one of those who had been with him since the beginning, had been at his side the whole time, listening with exasperation.

“Major Ashton’s too soft on the new recruits. The right amount of fear will do them good.”

“Still, Lieutenant Colonel Claudia’s going to let you have it if she catches you.”

As the stars twinkled above them, Gauss pretended not to notice this last remark and set about issuing his next commands.

VI

The bulk of the fighting had shifted to the Vilan Plateau, and Arthur, having pursued the rear guard thus far, commanded Argerion Gazakh and his mounted regiment to deal the final blow.

“I’m to finish them off! Oh, if that isn’t mighty fine of Arthur.” With a hearty

cackle, he then turned to his regiment and cried, “Come on then! With me!” Raising his pike high, Gazakh set off at a gallop across the battlefield with his three thousand riders in hot pursuit.

“Out of my way, insects!” He cleaved through the royal soldiers who stood in his way, plunging fearlessly forward, deep into the enemy’s ranks. The enemy’s movement lacked all vigor, perhaps a sign that their fatigue from the battle thus far had reached its peak.

“Lord Gazakh! If we keep this up, we’ll have the rear guard’s commander’s head in no time!”

“That’s the spirit, Hills. But remember, it’s not just any commander’s head I’m after.”

Hills chuckled. “Oh, I know, ser. It’s the legion commander’s head you want, eh?”

“That’s right, which is why we’ve got to rout the enemy in front of us quickly and catch up to their main force while they’re running scared. I, Gazakh, shall be the one to slay the legion commander!”

“Yes, you shall,” Hills agreed. “You hear that, you whoresons? Hurry up and finish off this riffraff!”

The soldiers bellowed back their response and in no time, the enemy line broke before their onslaught. Not long after, Gazakh’s eyes landed upon a figure astride a black horse who appeared to be the enemy commander.

That’ll be the commander—wait, that’s their commander? As the distance between them narrowed, the figure came more clearly into view and, for a second, Gazakh was so transfixed that he forgot he was in the middle of a battle. Partly to blame was her otherworldly beauty, but more so than that was that she appeared to be a girl in her mid-teens.

“Hills! That’s definitely a young girl on that black horse, isn’t it?”

“If it appears that way to you too, ser, then my eyes must not be playing tricks on me after all. The Royal Army must be really far gone if they’re putting little girls in command of their armies.”

“Just so, Hills. Still, little girl or not, once on the battlefield— Eh? What is she *doing?*”

The girl, for some reason, rose nimbly to stand on her saddle, and then—

What?! She vanished?! No sooner had he thought it than the girl reappeared, standing at the base of his own horse’s neck with a smile on her face. It happened so suddenly Gazakh entirely lost his voice. Hills, who rode beside him, stared at the girl like he’d seen a ghost.

“Hey, you’re the commander of this regiment, right?” she asked.

“I-I am.” Such was the power this girl exuded that Gazakh replied before he could help himself. “How...How the hell are you standing on the back of a running horse like it’s nothing?” he demanded. As they were enemies, he figured she might not give him a proper answer. She certainly had no obligation to do so. Even so, Gazakh had to ask. Standing upon a still horse he could understand, but to effortlessly stand upon the back of a horse at full gallop was no ordinary feat. Not only that, but his horse moved as though unfazed by the weight of another person on its back. It was only natural that he had questions.

The girl laughed. “Oh, it’s because I’m using Featherweight,” she said breezily. There was nothing in her face to suggest she was lying, but “featherweight” meant nothing to Gazakh. He told her to explain herself, and she told him it was a technique that rendered one’s body as light as a feather. He would have scoffed at this if he had not had living proof in the form of the girl before his very eyes. It was so much that he trembled.

“Now, seeing as I answered your question, is it all right if I wrap this up?” The girl’s hand went to her sword. She drew it from its scabbard to reveal an ebony blade that emitted a dark mist. The moment Gazakh saw it, he was gripped by an unspeakable fear, and threw himself from his horse’s back.

“Guh!” In his haste, he couldn’t break his fall and he slammed into the ground chest-first. “Wh-What the hell is that?! That black mist, it’s like death itself given form!”

Faced with the girl’s mysterious powers, her armor with its appalling crest, the deathly blade swathed in black mist, and her inhuman beauty, the feeling of trespassing in a world not his own seized Gazakh tightly.

“Hmm. I don’t really know the answer to that myself,” the girl replied.

“What?!” Gazakh’s mud-splattered face jerked up and he saw the girl, her smile still in place. The only change was the ebony blade now gripped in her hand. Black mist continued to flow down its edge.

“So, are we done?” the girl asked, then caught herself. “Sorry, I mean, I’m going to kill you now.”

Gazakh let out a wild howl. There was no time to draw his sword. Jumping to his feet, he took aim at the girl’s jaw and cut up with his fist. He had once beaten a bear to death with his bare hands, which were hard as rock, but the girl caught the blow effortlessly with her left hand. There was a dull *crack* as his hand broke.

With a dull moan, Gazakh said, “How can you be so strong?!”

“Because I trained hard, of course.”

“You *trained*...?” Gazakh repeated slowly. “Impossible. You don’t get to that level through *training*. Are you some sort of monster?”

“Oh, that again. I’m not a monster, I’m Olivia.”

“I don’t give a damn about your na—” Suddenly, there was a whistle of something cutting through the air and the world flipped before Gazakh’s eyes.

“Bye-bye.” The girl’s farewell echoed in Gazakh’s mind as he was sucked down into darkness without end.

Olivia left the man as he sank to his knees and crumpled, gushing blood. Mounting Comet once more, she ordered Claudia to light the signal fire; then, her cape billowing behind her, she turned to her soldiers.

“We regroup into columns. The first column of heavy infantry will carry out a suppression attack. Light infantry in the second column, covering both offense and defense. Archers in the third column, four-stage deflection volleys. Now the counterattack begins!”

It was the third hour past the turn of the new day, and still the battle raged

on.

“For a last, desperate act of resistance, I’ll be damned if they aren’t persistent...” Arthur muttered to himself. After that brilliant performance in the Galloch Canyon, he’d seen that the rear guard, at least, had a good commander, but that didn’t matter when the battle was already in Arthur’s clutches. All they had done was fractionally lengthen their life spans.

“Should I send in the next unit, ser?”

“No. We can’t waste any more time on this. Close in and finish them—”

“Commander!” A pale-faced soldier came running in. “The enemy is coming at us from the south!”

“A new enemy?” Arthur replied with a look of skepticism. “Surely the ones who escaped didn’t come all the way back.”

They would be sending all their labors up in smoke if it were true. Returning served no strategic nor tactical purpose. The whole thing was categorically farcical. Arthur couldn’t read their intentions at all. He wasn’t prepared for what next came out of the soldier’s mouth.

“It’s unclear if they’re the same force that retreated earlier, but they number around thirty thousand!”

“Did you say thirty thousand?!” Lasie exclaimed.

“*Thirty* thousand?” Arthur demanded. “Not three?”

The soldier shook their head emphatically. “*Thirty* thousand, ser! And they’re moving to encircle our forces with terrifying efficiency!”

“It can’t be...” Arthur said, mind racing. “That’s impossible!”

How could a force that had started off with fewer than ten thousand soldiers have returned with three times that number? The idea of reinforcements briefly flashed through his mind, but in that case, the far more logical course would have been to send them in from the start. He confirmed the particulars, but all he managed to learn was that the soldier wasn’t lying.

Turning the bad situation still worse, the encircled rear guard had not moved to retreat. Instead, as though in response to the force of thirty thousand, they

had launched a counteroffensive. Arthur's forces faced one attack from within, and one from without. This was ultimately none other than a pincer maneuver in a different form.

"Commander..."

Arthur made a noise of disgust. "What the hell is Aurion Baltza doing? If he were here, the advantage of numbers would flip back in our favor!" He stared with loathing at the ill-omened crest on the black banners and gritted his teeth. Setting aside the force they had surrounded, from what Arthur had seen, the enemy on their outside was relatively lacking in discipline. Three times he tried to break through the enemies that encircled them, but each attempt was thwarted. Whoever was giving commands must have been in possession of an extraordinary mind, for the enemy headed off all Arthur's moves as though they knew what he would do before he acted.

No matter. Baltza—just get Baltza to us...

But Arthur's hopes were to be dashed in an unexpected way.

"What...What did you just say?"

"Aurion Baltza was killed in battle. His army was decimated..." Smeared with muck and blood, the runner's voice was flat. Lasie continued to ask the same question, his voice growing louder, but there was no change in the runner's lifeless response.

Arthur, so assured of his victory until a few scant hours earlier, couldn't accept what was happening.

How can I face Drake...? Arthur lashed out with his commander's baton, trying to banish Drake's smirk from his mind, and snapped it in two.

VII

There was supposed to be a gag order on the news of Baltza's defeat, but it didn't take long before every soldier knew about it. There had been a sheer drop in morale, after which they had lost a staggering number of soldiers. The result of this was that the encirclement had drawn tighter, and now even the commanders were starting to hear furious bellowing and cries of hatred. The

tables had turned completely on the Northern Perscillan Army, and they were reconciled to going entirely on the defensive.

“Commander, if this goes on...” Lasie said, his face pale. Besides Lasie, the faces of the other commanding officers were also drawn. No one came forward with a plan to break them out of this predicament. Instead, all they did was watch Arthur’s every move. Arthur was used to thinking of his officers as no better than nasty muck.

“Commander! The vanguard of the Royal Army has engaged our fourth defensive perimeter!”

Such a report meant one thing. The Royal Army had penetrated their third defensive perimeter, the cornerstone of their defense. Arthur’s fists shook as he accepted that they would soon be within reach of the lion’s claws.

“Commander...” Lasie said. “Will you give the order to retreat?” As he gave voice to the words that Arthur had deliberately pushed from his mind, the other officers all began to voice their unanimous support.

I am beset by incompetents who hold back their betters. Oh, what a relief it would be to just round them up and lop their heads off... His arm began to reach for the hilt of his sword, but Arthur stopped himself at the last moment as it occurred to him that such an act would affect no change in the situation and invite needless chaos.

The gray timbre of Lasie’s voice shifted like a kaleidoscope and slid into Arthur’s ears.

“Commander, we no longer have the luxury of choice.”

Arthur was silent a moment, then said, “So be it.” He brushed off another vision of Drake that passed across his mind’s eye, then gave the order for a full retreat.

The lateness of the orders would place a great burden on those in command and demand flexible thinking, but with backbreaking effort, Arthur regrouped their forces into an arrowhead formation. In the end, though they lost still more soldiers along the way, his command unit succeeded in breaking out through the enemy’s heavy encirclement. Historians of later generations all rated Arthur

as a merely average general, save for the high praise they gave to this thrilling escape, records of which still remained. That was how grueling it was.

“Commander!”

“So they’re not just going to let us go after all...”

A female knight riding a magnificent white horse charged at their flank with three thousand soldiers behind her. The arrowhead formation was unrivaled in its penetrative power, but it also had a weak point—it could be easily broken by attacks to the flanks. The attacks their flanks had borne in the course of breaking free had been severe and left their formation in total shambles. Now, in the face of just such an assault, the command unit was immediately plunged into disarray. Arthur took out Maitreya, his weapon.

“As if disposable scum like you could even scratch me!” he bellowed. He beat back the attacks of the crowd of Royal Army soldiers with his shield, and, with his perfectly timed movements, the bodies quickly piled up around him. Arthur’s style of fighting expurgated any and all inefficiencies. While repelling his enemies with the upside-down triangular shield strapped to his right arm, he felled them with Maitreya, in a brilliant, seamless fusion of offense and defense.

The female knight on the white horse approached him slowly, a bloodstained sword in one hand. Arthur sensed that this was not an opponent to trifle with and immediately held both sword and shield to the ready.

“I am Claudia Jung, knight of the Royal Army. Do you have a name?”

Arthur looked at her for a moment. “Not one I share with those beneath me,” he said at length.

“I see...” she replied. “No matter. I think I can guess it from that splendid armor of yours.” Arthur stared in wonderment at Claudia as she leaned forwards in her stance and raised her sword, for he had glimpsed an inscrutable yellow gleam in her eyes.

Eh? What’s that glow...?

In the moment when he was distracted by her eyes, Claudia closed in on him with terrifying speed. She shot past him like a gust of wind, and no sooner had Arthur realized it than he felt an intense pain in his right arm. He looked down

and saw a gaping wound gushing blood. If he had been any slower in drawing back, she would have taken his arm off.

“My core was off-center,” Claudia said to herself. “I still can’t fully control it...” Having come around behind Arthur, she moved to assume the same stance from before. That had to mean she was going to do the same attack again. Only, Arthur had to admit he wasn’t sure if he could evade the next one. Her speed was simply too extraordinary. But if he were to block her instead, he would need his right arm, which was deeply wounded. He couldn’t even hold his shield up properly. For the first time in his life, Arthur felt death breathing down his neck.

What should I do? How do I get out—?!

While Claudia leaned forwards in her stance and fixed him with an icy glare, Arthur seized a half-dead royal soldier and pulled her close. The corners of his mouth curled.

“What are you playing at?” Claudia asked at length.

“Do you have it in you to cut through her to get to me?” he asked. Claudia didn’t respond. “Yes, just as I thought. You could never throw this soldier’s life aside. You’re not that sort of person.” This woman had just now proudly declared that she was a knight. Arthur had therefore guessed she would value honor above all else, and he had been absolutely right. He himself valued a knight’s honor no higher than dirt, but here, it had saved him.

“I’m sure I don’t need to tell you again,” he said, “but if you make even the slightest funny move, I kill her right away.” Claudia still didn’t say anything. “A wise decision. In which case, I’ll be leaving.” He took a step back, intending to leave. A second later, he lost his balance and went sprawling on the ground.

In his shock, he heard Claudia’s voice. “Oh, I see. Control requires unyielding force of will, not just technique. Well, thanks to your disgusting cowardice, I’ve made some progress. You have my thanks.” Since when had she been standing above him? She touched the tip of her sword to his brow. Here, Arthur became aware of the pain in his legs. He looked down and saw that they had been cleanly severed below the knee.

“Eh?! Euuuuurgh?!” It only took a few moments before his yell of alarm

transformed into a dying scream.

VIII

“I have word that Lieutenant Colonel Claudia has slain the enemy commander. Their forces have thus ceased all organized attacks. We will now shift to cleaning up the remnants.”

The runner wore a beaming smile.

“Knew we could count on the lieutenant colonel. So far as I can tell, our victory is assured.”

“Yeah, sounds like it,” Olivia agreed. “Right, I’m off for a bit, so you look after the rest, Ashton.”

She slipped from Comet’s saddle and petted the horse’s back, saying, “I’ll be back soon, okay?” Then, inexplicably, she set off walking west. In that direction lay a forest.

“Excuse me? What’ve you got to do in the forest that you’re leaving me in charge?” Ashton called after her. “Don’t tell me you’re going to catch a bird or something because you’re hungry.”

“I wouldn’t tell you that. There aren’t any tasty-looking birds around here.”

“So if they looked tasty, you would?” Ashton retorted. Olivia cackled, but didn’t stop walking. They should have been about to declare victory, but how could they when the legion commander, the most important role, was absent?

Ashton explained this to Olivia, but all she said was, “You two take care of all that.” With that, she vanished between the trees.

“You seem to really enjoy hide-and-seek, but do you really want to keep going?” Olivia pushed her way through the forest until she came to one tree and looked up into its branches. There was a rustle of leaves and a small shadow dropped straight down to the ground.

The shadow—a man—stood up in one smooth motion. “How’d you know?” he said, without any trace of apology. He was dressed all in black with a mask,

like the rats Olivia had seen elsewhere. Yet there were small variations in his attire, and more significantly, the *quality* of the bloodlust she sensed in him was entirely different. This, Olivia concluded, was a different species of rat from the ones she'd met before.

"You did a good job of veiling your bloodlust, but you still focused too much on me."

"Ah, so that was it." A chuckle escaped the man's throat.

"By the way, why are you so small?" Olivia asked. She'd been wondering ever since she'd first laid eyes on the man. He was an adult, but he couldn't have been taller than Patty from the Ashcrow Inn. Even if he hadn't gotten enough to eat during his growth spurt, that wouldn't explain his being *this* small. It was a mystery on the same level as the mysterious mystery box of mysteries.

"Being this size has all sorts of advantages in an assassin's line of work. It's as simple as that," the man replied matter-of-factly.

"You mean you're that size on purpose?"

"Well, I did will myself to stop growing, so yes. I suppose I am."

"Wow. That's a surprise." Olivia had never heard of anyone willing themselves to stop growing, not even in a book. Even now, the world was full of things she didn't know. She felt a childlike sense of amazement.

"You're one to talk. While you were out there playing soldiers, I saw chance after chance to take your head off. Only, even though you *look* laughably defenseless, in reality, you're anything but. I thought in that case, I'd hit you with my Qi and that would end you, but you laughed it off—even though I threw enough Qi at you to knock out a normal person. But then, you're of the Deep Folk, our old enemy."

Olivia was always being called "monster" and "death god," but this was the first time she had heard "deep folk." She asked the man what it meant and saw the eyes peering out of his mask ever so slightly widen.

"You don't even know your people?" he said. "But then again, that's not so strange. You were only a baby, after all."

“Huh? Do you know something about me?” Olivia, who had thought Z was the only one who knew about her infancy, felt a sudden rush of interest in the man. He might even know where Z had gone.

“I never *dreamed* you’d still be alive after going into the Forest of No Retu—”

“Okay, whatever. Do you know about Z?”

“Z?” The man paused, then said, “And what if I do?”

“You *do* know, don’t you!” Olivia cried, leaning forwards excitedly. The man quickly drew back, then leapt lightly into a tree.

“Won’t you tell me?”

“Whatever happens, you’re going to die here. Knowing won’t help you.” With that, the man came at her, freewheeling through the air between the trees and the ground as he released knife after needle-shaped knife at her with no discernible pattern. Only when Olivia had knocked them all down did he return to the ground.

“You are better trained than the Deep Folk I fought long ago. I see why Nefer was worried...”

“Have you given up? Will you tell me about Z now?” Olivia leaned in towards the man again, but then her hand brushed against something. Red liquid dripped to the ground.

“Huh?” Straining her eyes, she saw something that looked like threads drawn taut all around her without gaps. It looked like it’d be tough to get through without touching them.

“You finally noticed.”

“What is this?” she asked, lightly prodding the thread in front of her eyes. She could tell it wasn’t ordinary thread, but nor was it steel wire or anything of that sort.

“Specially crafted thread made from the silk of the Chano cocoon, imbued with my Odh. It cuts better than any crude blade.” He drew his left hand back and, with a straining noise, Olivia saw the threads begin to close in on her. She put her hand on her sword.

Madala watched Olivia draw the ebony blade. “Don’t make this difficult with futile resistance,” he said without expression. “No mere blade can cut through my threads. Escape from the Boundary of Mortal Severance is impossi—?!”

Without any forewarning, Olivia threw the sword. It sliced easily through the threads that stretched out from the back of his left hand and impaled his right shoulder. Madala was thrown backwards by the impact and pinned to a tree behind him.

Unbelievable. She cut through my threads, he thought. *Injuries sustained, laceration to the right shoulder. Otherwise...unharmmed.*

He took hold of the hilt of the ebony blade that pierced both him and the great tree to pull it out. As he did so, a hand pale as eggshells covered his own. There was only one person it could be. It was Olivia.

“Your scurrying around was getting annoying,” she explained. With a smile, she pushed the sword in deeper. Madala felt a burst of pain in his shoulder as blood spurted from it unchecked. Beneath his mask, his face contorted with agony. When more than half the length of the blade was buried in the tree trunk, Olivia at last removed her hand. It would be impossible to pull it out now that it was embedded so deeply.

“Now I can listen without distractions. So, could you tell me about Z?”

“Oh, I’ll tell you.”

“Okay, where is Z no—”

“I don’t know a damn thing about anyone called Z.”

Olivia paused. “You lied?” She was still smiling, but all color had drained from her eyes. Madala felt ice-cold sweat run down his back.

“I never lied. All I said was, ‘And what if I do?’ You just jumped to conclusions.”

Olivia sighed. “Human language really is so difficult.” Her hands reached out slowly to cradle Madala’s face. With a loud *crack* the mask covering it fell to the ground in pieces.

“You’ve beaten me, in spite of everything...” he told Olivia. “But this is the beginning, not the end. From here on out, you—the Deep Folk—shall know no peace. My brethren, the Asura, will make sure of that.”

“Do you mean you have other friends who know about me?”

“And what if I do?”

There was a pause, then Olivia said, “I can’t wait to meet them.”

Madala felt extraordinary pressure on his temporal bones. Through the gaps between Olivia’s fingers, he caught a glimpse of her face. She wore a sweet smile that sent a chill through his soul.



Chapter Six: A Feigned Alliance

I

The Chapel at Es Ludo Palace in the Twelfth City of Northern Perscilla

“Is my memory failing me? I thought I ordered that you stay confined to your residence, Aurion Gravis Drake.” Cassandra fixed him with a withering stare.

“Your memory serves you well,” Drake replied, unruffled. “I am cognizant of my rudeness, but this is a matter of the greatest urgency.”

“The greatest urgency, is it?” Cassandra said. “Oh, very well. Out with it, then.” She yawned lazily, then recrossed her voluptuous legs.

“A messenger came to report that the Northern Perscillian Army was defeated by the Royal Army. Argerion Gravis Arthur was killed in battle, along with well over three-quarters of our soldiers.”

He had received the report an hour earlier. As the news brought by the messenger from Fort Safar made all too clear, its contents were horrifying.

Cassandra stared blankly at Drake for a moment. “Is this a joke?” she said, forcing the words from her lips.

“As you well know, Your Majesty, I never joke.”

There was a pause. “If, hypothetically, we had lost to the empire, *that* I could understand. But not against the half-dead Royal Army.” Cassandra seemed to seize upon this as she went on. “Yes, yes—that must be it. The messenger gave you false information. Our mighty army would never lose!”

Cassandra’s usual mask of arrogance fell away before her desperate refusal to accept the defeat of the Northern Perscillian Army. Without a word, Drake shook his head, then requested the lady-in-waiting who stood at his side to pass on the box he carried. She took it with an air of puzzlement, then lightly ascended the stairs and knelt to present it to Cassandra, who rested it on her knees.

“What is this?” she demanded, staring intently at it.

“Open it, Your Majesty, and you will see.”

Cassandra raised her hands uncertainly a few times, then with trepidation, she opened the lid. Immediately, a piercing scream burst from her, and she flung the box away. Halfway through its tumble down the stairs, its contents spilled out and the lady-in-waiting, seeing what it was, let out a wail just as earsplitting as her mistress’s.

The lurid image of Arthur’s severed head as it rolled back towards Drake would not soon leave them.

“Are you convinced now?” he asked.

“H-How? How could our army fail...?” Now that she’d had the proof thrust before her eyes, Cassandra seemed at last to accept the reality of their defeat. Drake exhaled, relieved that now they could have a sensible conversation.

“You have no ideas, Your Majesty?” he asked.

“It’s because I don’t that I’m asking *you*!” Cassandra snatched a glass of wine, then threw it at Drake, hitting him square in the face. Red liquid trickled from his forehead. Cassandra was breathing hard, overcome by rage, while her lady-in-waiting stood by in obvious consternation.

“Very well. I shall tell you,” Drake said. “The Royal Army was stronger than the Northern Perscillan Army. It is as simple as that.” Cassandra’s face contorted unpleasantly at this deliberately concise summation. “Three times I warned you, my princess. I told you it was dangerous to go after the Royal Army. If, emboldened by this victory, they mount a counterinvasion, we will not be able to hold them off.”

The lady-in-waiting went pale, perhaps imagining what would follow from that.

The Royal Army would have to take either Fort Safar or Fort Idola in order to take Es Ludo Palace. Under normal circumstances, an adequate number of soldiers would be deployed at both forts, but Arthur had pressed them all into his army. Even if they barricaded the castle, it would scarcely buy them any time, and besides, they had already lost the majority of the soldiers they might

have relied on to relieve a siege. If Es Ludo were besieged, they would have to fight on the assumption that all they could hope for was an honorable death.

“I am your queen. Do you mean to threaten me?” There was a flicker of a shadow in Cassandra’s narrow eyes.

“I have spoken nothing but the truth.”

“Then call for aid! The Third City could make it in time!” Cassandra’s voice grew shrill and hysterical.

“How should I beg for aid? Should I tell them that we took up arms against Fernest and were defeated, and now, faced with a counterinvasion, we want their help?”

“I-It is stipulated in the Charter of the Sutherland Thirteen that the coalition force will respond to an invasion. You must know that as well as I do. They *can’t* refuse us, regardless of the circumstances.” In an abrupt shift, a smile of gloating triumph spread over Cassandra’s face.

Drake let out a deep and obvious sigh. “If you are so sure, I suggest you make the appeal yourself.”

“I am ordering *you* to do it!”

“I realize that, my princess, but at present, I am confined to my residence,” Drake replied, keeping his expression bland. “I’m afraid, given my position...”

“Then I release you from your confinement!” Cassandra shrieked, the pitch of her voice climbing even higher. “Now, *go!*” She pointed at the door to the chapel.

Drake returned a polite bow, then gave his unreserved assent. He left the chapel alone.

The memory of this should keep Her Highness subdued for a little while, at least... he thought. That Arthur, that constant thorn in his side, had done him the favor of dying was an unexpected bonus. Still, he thought with a heavy sigh, the losses had been too great. Turning his mind to the future, including how they would rebuild their army, he sighed yet again.

“Yes, yes. At worst, we can summon an emergency Council of the Thirteen

Stars, and—" Hearing Cassandra's muttering voice from the room behind him, Drake was struck with a deep weariness.

II

The King of Lions' Chamber, Leticia Castle, Fernest

The lights of the Barbarossan chandeliers glittered over the King of Lions' Chamber, where the king was hosting a dinner party. A beautiful melody added to the elegance of the room, the center of which was occupied by a number of round tables crammed with sumptuous dishes and high-quality wines. High-ranking officers mingled amiably with noble ladies dressed up in extravagant gowns, smiling over the rims of their glasses.

"Everyone is enjoying themselves."

"That is all thanks to Your Majesty's prestige."

"Quite, quite." At a table at the edge of the room, nodding in satisfaction, sat Alfonse sem Galmond, ruler of Fernest. It was his first official appearance in some time, and to the surprise of those who knew how he had been of late, a rosy glow of health dusted his cheeks. He exchanged the odd word with Cornelius, who sat beside him with a bright smile.

His demeanor arose from the Royal Army having forced the Northern Imperial Army back to the border, and the victory they had secured in the decisive battle on the central front. Even the unexpected invasion from Northern Perscilla had been thoroughly routed by Olivia and the Eighth Legion. Then there was the grand counteroffensive strategy, the Twin Lions at Dawn. In the war so far, Fernest had been solely on the defensive, but now they were planning to launch an invasion into imperial territory, as far as the imperial capital of Olsted. Not only that, but they now formed a united front with the Holy Land of Mekia. Under such circumstances, it was only natural that Alfonse make an appearance at the banquet.

Olivia herself, who could claim more than a little credit for Alfonse's mood, loudly smacked her lips with unrestrained relish, her eyes drooping in an expression of rapture. It turned out that Olivia's beloved Chef Royal was behind

tonight's event as he had been at the previous victory banquet. Alfonse had arranged this of his own volition in response to the Eighth Legion's victory.

Nowadays, all and sundry identified Olivia as the most valorous soldier in the kingdom, but even now that she was of a rank where she was addressed as "my lady," there had been no change in her behavior.

She's the same as ever... Claudia thought. *Just watching her is giving me heartburn.* She could do nothing but sigh as the food piled on the round table vanished before her eyes. Olivia standing gallantly on the battlefield giving the order to launch the counterattack against the Northern Perscillans felt like a dream.

It'd help me out too if she'd only display a little of the dignity befitting a general. Claudia appreciated that she shouldn't expect dignity from a sixteen-year-old girl in the first place, but there were appearances to be maintained for the troops. No one was underestimating her anymore after seeing her valor for themselves, but Claudia personally still wished she would present herself like the commander of a legion, even if it was just an act. A few days earlier she had happened to run into Blood and asked his advice, but he had only laughed her off, saying it would "do as much good as trying to explain military theory to a baby."

Unexpectedly, Olivia herself had shown some degree of change in her consciousness. She had apparently run into Otto quite by coincidence just after Cornelius had promoted her to major general, and comported herself as a senior officer—but Olivia, her face sour, had told Claudia that this encounter had ended with her fleeing the scene as fast as her legs would carry her. Otto might have been the Man in the Iron Mask, but Claudia still couldn't imagine what might have transpired such that Olivia, the senior officer, had wound up *fleeing*.

Well, I suppose that's in character too, in a way... She looked over at Olivia again. Tonight, Olivia wore a black dress with a skirt that swelled expansively out from her waist to the floor. As she herself was resolute as ever in her indifference to clothing, Claudia had picked it out for her.

This dress had no plunging back or neckline, but rather was adorable in its liberal use of frills, lace, and pintucks. Claudia had worried that it might look a little childish with Olivia's features, but when Olivia actually tried it on, the effect had been perfectly acceptable. It seemed that at the end of the day, when you were divinely beautiful, you could pull anything off.

"Claudia, if you don't eat something soon, it'll all be gone," Olivia said, her eyes running swiftly around the other tables.

"I know it's too late to ask you to stop eating now, my lady, but would you please greet at least a *few* people? They're all waiting for you."

People everywhere had been shooting covert looks their way all evening. It wasn't all high-ranking officers who made up the group gazing at Olivia either; individuals connected with the royal family were among their number too. It was painfully obvious that they were angling at worming their way into Olivia's good graces, and Claudia found it to be, put bluntly, absolutely disgusting. The confounding thing was that despite this, it just wouldn't do to simply ignore such people.

Though this sort of situation was a common feature of noble society, it wasn't something Claudia was fond of. Of course, according to her mother Elizabeth, she looked at things in entirely the wrong way for a noble.

Olivia set her knife and fork down on her clean plate, not bothering to keep her displeasure from showing on her face.

"Oh, come on. Why can't you talk to them instead? Isn't that part of your job as my aide? I'm really, *really* busy right now." With all the food that had been on the table now in her belly, Olivia then set off cheerfully in search of further prey. Claudia followed, whispering in her ear.

"Please, pay *some* attention to your position. You are the general in command of the *Eighth Legion*."

"Yeah, but it's not like I wanted to do it..." Olivia muttered, pouting. Her eyes were still locked on the food.

"Even then. A legion commander must—"

"Oh, it looks like someone's arrived."

Olivia pointed at something behind Claudia. Claudia turned and saw the great doors swing solemnly open to reveal a woman in a brilliant white dress. The woman lingered there with an exquisite smile on her lips.

Time might have stopped, such was the silence that followed, but in fact it was but a moment before sighs and gasps of awe broke out from every corner of the room.

That must be Seraph Sofitia Hell Mekia, ruler of the Holy Land of Mekia... Claudia thought. *She's just as astonishingly beautiful as the rumors said—indeed, she could give the general a fine challenge.*

Sofitia walked forwards with impeccable grace, her stiletto heels clicking as she made her way to Alfonse. Behind her followed a beautiful woman with shining white hair, and another woman with exquisite features and hair of an icy pale blue. It was clear from their crisp movements that they were soldiers, and highly skilled, if their perfectly timed steps were anything to go by. And behind them—

Of course he's here too. He's got some nerve... Claudia glared at Johann, who walked at the end of the procession. Noticing her gaze, he gave her a playful smile and a wave. Olivia had clearly noticed him too, because she waved her arms at him with a lighthearted smile.

Look at him smirk, the bastard! And what's the general doing waving at him like we're friends!

Claudia huffed loudly as Sofitia passed her and came to stand beside Alfonse. There, she greeted the room at large, her voice soft and measured.

“To you, the people of Fernest, I offer my greetings upon the occasion of our first meeting. I am Sofitia Hell Mekia, ruler of the Holy Land of Mekia. It is with pleasure that I join my hands with yours so that together we may thwart the rampant ambitions of the Asvelt Empire.”

Placing one hand over the other at her middle, she bowed courteously. At this, thunderous applause erupted from the crowd. Perhaps this was what one called irresistible charisma, for although Sofitia's words were of little substance, it felt to Claudia as though every single one conveyed the utmost respect. She could actually see the fighting spirit burning in the eyes of more than a few of

the officers as they listened.

“Seraph Sofitia, you have our sincere gratitude for joining your strength to Fernest’s. We have heard of how you threw everything into beating down the empire’s vassal state of Stonia. We could not ask for a more steadfast ally.”

“You will forgive my expression, Your Majesty, but a mere puppet of the empire is nothing to the Winged Crusaders. The empire made a truly foolish choice when it decided to bare its teeth against the Holy Land of Mekia, and it will soon taste the fruits of that choice.”

“Q-Quite so. Absolutely right. Our nations shall join hands to crush the empire’s ambitions. Thus we shall have stability in Duvedirica once more.”

“Indeed. Let us bring this war-torn age to a close, that together we may achieve peace.” A touch of menace now graced Sofitia’s smile. Alfonse’s expression grew strained. The Kingdom of Fernest was in decline, but the Holy Land of Mekia still could not match them in economic nor military power. This was natural, given the difference in scale between the two nations. In an individual comparison of Alfonse and Sofitia as rulers, however, there was no question that Sofitia emerged superior.

“To Fernest and Mekia! Long may our nations prosper!”

Glasses tinkled as the guests made their toast, after which Alfonse encouraged them to mingle again. He then took the initiative to show Sofitia over to where the guests of honor were seated. As the room filled once more with the buzz of lively conversation, Claudia realized that Olivia had moved on to yet another table. Apparently, she ought to have stayed on task even through the opening speeches.

What am I going to do with her... Huh? Sensing eyes on them, Claudia turned around to see the women who had accompanied Sofitia looking fixedly at Olivia, as if appraising her. Olivia must have noticed them too, because her hands stopped for a moment, but she went back to her meal without turning around.

Those two... They’ll have heard about Olivia from Johann, I’m sure. I can see why they’d be interested, but those aren’t the eyes of someone looking at their future ally. Not to be outdone, Claudia stared back at the two women. But then,

sliding casually between them, there appeared an individual she had no wish to look upon. Before her, sweeping back his flaxen hair, was the handsome visage of Johann. Claudia was aware that her hands had clenched into fists.

“Dear me, that look earlier was so intense, I thought my heart might burst out of my chest. In any case, you are as stunning as ever, Lady Claudia.”

Opening with this grating flattery, Johann put a hand to his breast and bowed respectfully. The woman with pale blue hair who was watching him visibly rolled her eyes, and the white-haired woman looked like she harbored similar feelings.

I might actually get on with those two, Claudia observed. She felt a sliver of affinity with the two women, but she set it aside to focus her contempt on Johann’s obsequious presence.

“You have some nerve showing your face in front of me. Brazen, some might call it. Impudent, even.”

“That’s a harsh way to greet me after so long. But then, that’s just like you, Lady Claudia. It’s one of your great charms.” Johann smiled, flashing white teeth. Claudia, meanwhile, felt a second shiver of disgust run down her spine.

“So you were from Mekia all along,” she said at length.

“Do you accept now that I’m not from the empire?” Johann replied with an airy smile.

“I do. But I still don’t like you.”

“Dear me,” Johann said, widening his eyes dramatically. “What about me has earned your dislike?”

I really do have a physical aversion to this man with his endless theatrics, Claudia thought fervently.

“I dislike everything about you. You’d—”

“Hey, now. If you’re mad all the time, you’re going to get wrinkles.” Without warning, Olivia inserted herself into the conversation, patting Claudia on the shoulder. Of the food that had been on the table, not a trace remained.

“I don’t—I don’t have wrinkles! I’m far too young for that!” Claudia retorted,

unconsciously raising her voice. Olivia cackled with laughter. She *was* six years older than Olivia, but she wasn't at an age to be getting wrinkles. At least, she hoped not.

"Sorry, sorry," Olivia said, still chuckling, then she turned to Johann. "Long time no see. How've you been?" She gave him a friendly pat on the shoulder too. A sharp look flashed through Johann's eyes, but it was replaced just as quickly by a smile.

"I've been well. I'm pleased to see you looking just as cheerful as always, Lady Olivia. I liked the glamor of your last dress, but tonight's is lovely as well. It's only a pity that your dress cannot live up to your own charms."

"Hey, Claudia. What he's doing is called 'smile-talking,' right?" Olivia asked, pointing to her own mouth with her head cocked to one side.

"Not quite," Claudia corrected her. "He's what we call a freakish smooth talker."

Johann shook his head. "Both of you are mistaken. I speak nothing but the truth."

"That's exactly what I'm calling smooth-talking!" Claudia snapped, raising her voice again. Just then, she heard a sunny laugh. Looking around, her eyes came to rest on the smiling figure of Sofitia, a glass in one hand.

"My, how you all seem to be enjoying yourselves. If it is no intrusion, might I presume to join you?"

Claudia was struck speechless by the entrance of Sofitia, whom she regarded as the most dangerous person present. But Olivia readily answered, "Of course," and so Sofitia was welcomed into their midst. While Claudia struggled for words, Olivia, to her disbelief, actually reached and started touching the seraph's dress.

"How dare you!" The white-haired woman who stood behind Sofitia made to stop Olivia, her face a mask of fury. But Sofitia only smiled and with a wave of her hand, the other woman stopped short.

"Seraph Sofitia!" she said desperately.

“I don’t mind at all, Lara.”

“But for you to suddenly be—!”

Sofitia didn’t let her finish. She beat her silver staff once on the floor, then said, “I have told you that I do not mind.”

“I... Your pardon, my Seraph.” Lara fell a few steps back, looking daggers at Olivia. Claudia seized Olivia and dragged her away, then apologized for her rudeness.

“On the contrary, I’m sorry that one of mine made such a scene,” Sofitia replied. “Olivia, were you so very taken with my dress?”

“Oh, yeah. I’ve never seen a dress that sparkled like that before. And it’s so *smooth*.” Lara looked at her in disgust, but Olivia herself paid no attention to this. Instead, she went on blithely saying to no one in particular, “I wonder if the sparkles are shards of argentite...”

Johann, meanwhile, watched this exchange with an amused smile.

“Lady Olivia, please,” Claudia cut in urgently, “take more care with your manners. You’ll insult Lady Sofitia.”

“Huh?” Olivia was bewildered. “How come? It’s not like she’s my superior officer.”

“She might not be your superior officer, but she *is* the ruler of the nation Fernest is allied with. Proper manners are a given.”

The woman with pale blue hair gave a soft snort of laughter. *You’re that clueless?* it seemed to say. Olivia, the one being laughed at, was mystified.

“But why is it a given that I have to use proper manners with a ruler? I mean —”

“*Do we have an understanding?*” In an instant, the color drained from Olivia’s face, and she nodded frantically. It seemed she *had* understood.

“Sorry—um, I mean, my sincere apologies,” Olivia said with an awkward bow. Sofitia gave her a smile like warm spring sunshine, assuring her that no apology was necessary. Claudia, naturally, was dearly relieved.

“Manners really aren’t your strong suit, are they, Olivia?” Sofitia said with a little laugh. “Just like Johann told me. But it doesn’t bother me at all. Please, speak as you usually would.”

“What? Really?”

“I assure you, I do not mind.”

Claudia couldn’t bring herself to just take Sofitia at her word. It just wasn’t something the ruler of a whole nation said, especially not to a foreigner she was meeting for the first time.

Can I trust her? she wondered. *I don’t like to be disrespectful, but I want to be sure.* She glanced surreptitiously at Sofitia’s bright, intelligent eyes, and saw they were colored with truth. Apparently, she really meant what she said. Claudia was privately astonished by this generosity.

“*Really, really?*” Olivia asked again.

“Sofitia Hell Mekia always means what she says.”

“But Claudia...the yaksha...” Mumbling to herself, Olivia shot a fearful glance at Claudia. For some reason she was nervously twisting her hands together. Claudia made a note to interrogate her on what a “yaksha” was after the dinner party concluded.

“It’s not a problem, is it?” Sofitia asked. Claudia was at a loss for words. There was, of course, a problem. It might have been acceptable if it didn’t persist past that night, but she had the feeling it wasn’t going to end here.

While she was agonizing over what to do, Sofitia’s face lit up like a flower opening, and she laid her hands over Olivia’s.

“Then here is what we shall do. From today, Olivia and I shall be friends. Then, there is no need for proper manners.”

“Friends?”



“That’s right.”

“Oh! Right, friends don’t need to worry about proper manners, do they?” Olivia nodded a few times, satisfied with this, and the conversation sailed along smoothly, while Claudia stood there trying to process what had just happened. By the end, Olivia had even received an invitation to visit the Holy Land of Mekia. Here, Claudia frantically cut in.

“Lady Sofitia, I realize this is terribly rude, but I wonder whether such a thing should be decided solely between two such eminent individuals. There are your respective positions to be considered...”

Sofitia nodded firmly. “You are perfectly correct,” she said. “I seem to have gotten a little ahead of myself. For now, let us content ourselves with a courtesy visit. I’m sure that if I raise the matter with King Alfonse, he will be only too happy to oblige. The two of us are friends now, after all.” She finished with a beguiling smile.

So that’s it. This is what she hoped to get to by talking to Olivia... Claudia thought. What’s she plotting for after she brings Olivia to Mekia?

Watching the pair as they chatted happily out of the corner of her eye, Claudia grew warier still.

III

The West of the Kingdom of Fernest

A carriage drawn by two horses made its way through a boundless, black forest. Encircling the carriage rode the Seraphic Guard, clad in lilac armor embellished with a crest of silver wings. The rustle of leaves and the howls of wild beasts had them on edge, but they were on the highest possible alert for any person coming near the carriage.

It was a splendid piece of craftsmanship, constructed by the preeminent artisan of the age. Seated within it, attired in an equally splendid dress, was Seraph Sofitia Hell Mekia. In case of an emergency, she was accompanied by the mages Amelia, Johann, and Lara. And their caution extended still further. Historia, captain of the Twelve Guardians, rode ahead with ten of her best

warriors. If anyone appeared to block their path, she had orders from Lara to dispose of them without hesitation, and she had employed every possible security measure.

Sofitia, for whose sake all this security was in place, had made pleasant conversation with the others in the carriage for a while, until they left the royal capital of Fis, and she turned to Johann, whose face was fixed in a grim expression.

“Does something displease you, Johann?” she asked.

It was a moment before he responded. “I don’t mean any disrespect, but was it really necessary to take such risks in returning home? I’m sure you’re well aware of the dangers of the forest at night, my Seraph.”

“Are you questioning the decision of the seraph, Johann?” Lara said. She sat directly opposite him and there was a note of irritation in her voice.

“I am, of course, cognizant of the dangers of the forest at night. I know that I am placing a burden upon Historia and the Seraphic Guard. But the road through this forest is the shortest path back to Mekia, and thus we cannot avoid it.”

By the comparatively safe route, it would have taken four days longer to reach Mekia. This wasn’t the fault of Fernest for neglecting the upkeep of its domains, but simply because the inhabited regions of Duvedirica were few and far between. The majority of the continent was veined with mountains or coated in forest, all of which were riddled with beasts beyond what humans could handle. In particular, those that fell into the classes of dangerous beasts had been a source of menace since time immemorial. The greatest weapon the otherwise powerless humans could bring to bear against the beasts was intellect, and over many long years they had slowly carved out further territory. The history of humanity was just as much a history of survival against the beasts.

Johann rubbed his chin. “The reason you brought forward our departure in the face of danger...” he began with a searching look at Sofitia. “Is this so that you can invite Olivia Valedstorm to Mekia as soon as possible?”

“Correct. King Alfonse acquiesced to my request without suspecting a thing.

He is, in that sense, very easy to handle.”

Things would undoubtedly not have come off nearly so well had it been the Asvelt Empire’s Ramza the Wise. Alliance or no, no ruler should have allowed their greatest soldier out of their sight so easily. Sofitia had not spent long in Alfonse’s presence, but it had been more than enough time for her to get the measure of his ability.

“Is your intention to win Olivia Valedstorm over to Mekia, my Seraph?” asked Amelia, who sat beside Johann. She was expressionless, but Sofitia caught the slight arch of her eyebrows.

Sofitia chuckled. “And supposing that were the case, would I have your agreement, Amelia?”

“I would never oppose any decision of yours, my Seraph. Only...”

“Only?” Sofitia prompted.

“I don’t think the two of us will get on,” Amelia said at length. “She eats like a pig, and more importantly, she showed a total lack of respect to you, my Seraph.” She couldn’t stop her distaste from showing on her face. Lara was nodding vigorously, from which Sofitia assumed she held the same opinion.

Sofitia had seen the phenomenal pace at which Olivia had cleared the tables of food. The display of gluttony had surprised her, but she had also found it sweet how much Olivia had seemed to enjoy herself. When taken in combination with the girl’s beauty, which was even greater than what Johann had described, she could scarcely believe that this was the same Death God the mere sight of whom set the imperial army trembling with fear.

“The disrespect to the seraph is one thing, but aside from that, I don’t understand your antipathy, Amelia. In not only appearance but also temperament, don’t you think she rather resembles Angelica?”

Sofitia was persuaded by this characterization of Johann’s. Olivia’s air of innocence was undoubtedly just like Angelica’s. *They might actually get on rather well if I introduced them*, she mused, watching Amelia’s face twist.

“What does it have to do with anything if she resembles Angelica?” Amelia said slowly.

“Oh, nothing.” Johann smirked, at which Amelia, uncharacteristically for her, gave a loud *tsk*.

“My Seraph, I too have no objection to bringing Olivia Valedstorm into our ranks,” said Lara. “I suppose your ultimate goal is to shed light on the problem of magic?” At this, Johann’s smile vanished and was replaced by his former grim expression. Sofitia nodded with a small smile. “I thought so...” Lara said. “But how easily will she reveal what she knows, I wonder?”

“That is why, before anything else, we must draw her in. Nothing could be more foolish than rushing things and scaring her away.”

Even Sofitia had struggled to work out what sort of person Olivia was with only their short exchange at the dinner party to go off of. She had at least established with certainty that, for better or for worse, the girl had no desire for social advancement. But if a person had any sort of desire at all, Sofitia was confident she could find some way to entice them.

Then there’s also Lord von Sieger. It had been a shock even to Sofitia when she’d heard that he had fought off not only Amelia, but Johann as well. If they were going to fight the imperial army in the future, she would as a matter of course have to take Felix into consideration. Johann said he had invited him to come over to the Mekian side, but had met with no success. Olivia had blocked the theoretically impossible-to-evade *Blazelight Vortex* with magic, and Felix had done the same with his sword, which suggested to Sofitia that the pair were evenly matched in power. If Felix had no intention of changing sides, she wanted to secure Olivia’s strength so as to keep potential casualties to a minimum. This made her all the more strongly conscious of the necessity of proceeding carefully.

“I don’t disagree about drawing her in either,” Johann said, “but even if she’s willing to teach us about magic, that doesn’t mean we’ll be able to master it.”

Sofitia detected the repudiation of magic in Johann’s words. He had his pride, she supposed, as a first-rate mage. She understood something of how he felt, and so did not contradict him.

“That does not concern me, if that should be the case. She is still Fernest’s greatest military asset and a magic user. The benefits to Mekia from that alone

will be incalculable.”

“In the event that Olivia Valedstorm does accept your offer...” said Lara, “with what sort of treatment do you intend to welcome her?” There was a hint of tension in Lara’s expression.

“Yes, I believe Olivia was promoted from major all the way to major general, wasn’t she?”

“That is correct, my Seraph.”

“And even that hardly seems commensurate with her achievements...” Sofitia mused. “Yes, I suppose at minimum I would have to make her a senior thousand-wing, or else it wouldn’t line up.” There was a loud *clunk* in the carriage. Sofitia saw Amelia hurriedly retrieving the cup she had been holding from the floor, an apology spilling from her lips. It was empty, so there was no damage to the carpet spread out at their feet.

Lara shot her an icy glare. “Senior thousand-wing...” she repeated. “The fact is that, as I haven’t even seen Olivia Valedstorm fight with a sword, let alone use magic, I cannot judge whether such a thing would be appropriate.” She looked dubiously at Johann.

“Do you still entertain doubts, Blessed Wing Lara? I don’t like to admit it either, but there’s no denying that magic exists, and the magic she used was far beyond magecraft. Even in swordplay, I couldn’t come close to her. To be frank, even senior thousand-wing might not be sufficient.”

“As things stand, the only rank higher than senior thousand-wing is blessed wing. Do you think that Olivia Valedstorm is worthy of being made blessed wing, Johann?” Lara’s hair rippled slightly, and Johann smiled uncertainly.

“I hardly think my opinion matters. All of this is the sole prerogative of the seraph.” The eyes of all three of the others turned to Sofitia. She adjusted her posture.

“As you are all aware, I do not appoint people to important posts based on rank or blood. The only point that concerns me is that they possess the appropriate ability. I believe what Johann has told us, and the girl has proven her ability in battle against the imperial army. Having said that, my final decision

is based solely on what I see with my own eyes. Once we officially welcome Olivia into our ranks, then I will of course take the liberty of assessing her powers.”

At this, Amelia and Lara both nodded.

In truth, Sofitia didn't think there was even any need for that. Nothing could be clearer than the incredible extent to which the Royal Army had recovered from its former hopeless state. However, while Johann had actually crossed blades with Olivia, she knew that Amelia and Lara would not be immediately convinced. It was all but impossible to understand a person who existed outside common wisdom when you yourself were bound by it. Of course, Sofitia knew that they would not go against any decision of hers, but it would result in lingering bad feelings, which would represent a failure on her part as ruler of Mekia. If she were to unify the continent, she could not allow even a sliver of doubt to take root in the hearts of her subjects.

Of course, all of this comes down to whether Olivia will accept my invitation to her. When we get back to Mekia, the first thing to do will be to assemble all the best chefs. Then there's that woman who accompanies her. I suppose she's her aide, but she is something of an annoyance.

She looked out the window onto a harsh world where the struggle for survival raged without end. Raising a brisk clatter as it went, the carriage plunged on through the darkness.

Chapter Seven: The White Forest

I

In the expanse of land far to the north of the imperial capital of Olsted, there was a place known as the White Forest. Snowbound all year long, the forest was uninhabited by humans, overrun as it was by such class two dangerous beasts as unicorns and vampire birds. There were even whispers of the existence of a catastrophic class *three* dangerous beast known as “The Maw.” Because it so rarely showed itself, it was also sometimes called “the mythical beast.” Deciphering ancient texts revealed records that The Maw had long ago laid waste to a castle town, reducing it to ruins in a single night. In other sources, it was written that many thousands of soldiers had given their lives to at last slay the beast. There were also implausible stories that The Maw, beast though it was, could understand human language. Amongst the Kaka people, who had resided in the northern expanse since ancient times, it was seen as divine and worshiped.

I haven't come here in a very long time. Walking between the pale trees of this strange and sinister land, Felix, fully armed and armored, pushed on through the snow towards his destination. He was watched by the curious eyes of a tribe of long-armed black monkeys, who swung effortlessly from towering tree to towering tree like little pendulums.

He walked that unmarked path for something like two hours. Then the scenery before him opened out into a large clearing, and a simple hut constructed from logs came into view. *At last.* He let out a breath, visible in the cold air, but scarcely a moment later was struck by the sense of an oppressive presence behind him. He stopped. *That aura...* It clearly wasn't human, but nor was it the aura of a beast's raw instinct. Cautiously, Felix turned around and found himself looking at a creature with pure white fur. It was immense in size, graceful and beautiful, and possessed a regal dignity that was apparent at a

glance and set it apart from other beasts.

The great creature walked lazily towards Felix on its four legs, each of which could have brutally crushed a human with ease.

“It has been too long, Lord Vajra, King of Beasts,” Felix said. He straightened, then lowered his head in a courteous bow to Vajra, who looked down at him with glittering golden eyes. Vajra inclined its own head, then lowered its bulk to the ground and opened its mouth to reveal fearsome white fangs.

“Are you here for Lassara and the others?”

“I am. It has been a long time since last I journeyed here.”

“You were here just the other day.”

“From what I recall, it is a year gone since my last visit...” Felix said. Vajra exhaled deeply through its nose, raising a strong wind that set the snow flurry.

“The span of a year is like the blink of an eye to me...” it said. “But it is well. You would not think it, but she is rather prone to loneliness. It is well for you to pay her what attention you can. I have commanded the other beasts not to attack you, though I doubt they would best you anyway.”

“Your thoughtfulness is appreciated. I prefer not to engage in pointless slaughter.” Felix stroked the pale yellow pouch that hung from his belt. It contained snow safflowers, crushed and hardened, which were said to ward off beasts. The method had lately gained popularity amongst hunters, who said the more vicious the beast, the more the safflower repelled them. When Felix last came to the forest he had been attacked twice, but this time he had encountered nothing. He wasn’t sure if that was the power of the safflowers, or if Vajra’s command had kept them at bay.

Vajra let out a short laugh. “You are the only human who could speak so after venturing into these lands, where life is worth so little.”

“You’ll have to excuse me.”

“When your business is concluded, you should leave quickly. The scent you give off is far more provocative to the beasts.”

With a glance at Felix, Vajra slowly stood up, then turned and, swinging its three tails, walked off into the trees. Felix watched Vajra go, then set off once more towards the little log hut.

He arrived soon after and knocked on the door. Moments later, a voice he knew well floated out to him.

“That smells like Felix!” From a window that stood open a crack came zooming the fairy Silky Breeze, leaving a trail of stardust behind her before coming to rest on Felix’s shoulder. She was shaped almost exactly like a human, only she was no bigger than his palm. Most distinctively, she had sharply pointed ears and four gray wings sprouting from her back. Silky smiled innocently at Felix, who gently petted the fairy’s head with his index finger. She kicked her legs up and down and rubbed her cheek against Felix.

“It’s been a while, Silky. Are you well?”

“I’m always well! Only Lassara’s running me into the ground, she works me so hard. But then, that’s only because I’m so good at magecraft.” Silky puffed out her chest importantly.

“I don’t see you for a year, and look how pretty you’ve gotten in the meantime.” Felix placed Silky on his hand and examined her. Her hair, which he remembered last time had only reached her shoulders, was now down to her elbows, and her face had lost some of the baby fat that had been there a year earlier, highlighting her already elegant features. She wore a dress the color of fresh leaves that nicely complemented her pale pink hair.

“O-Oh! I got that pretty?” Silky did a graceful pirouette, but she put a little too much energy into it. The skirt of her dress went billowing up and she ended up frantically pushing it back down.

“Oops... Did you see anything?” She glared at Felix, her cheeks bright red. When she was embarrassed, she acted no differently from a human woman.

“Not a thing,” replied Felix, who really hadn’t seen anything, but Silky was not appeased. If anything, the suspicion in her eyes intensified and she started to stamp her feet.

“Liar, liar, liar! You saw up my skirt!”

“I told you, I didn’t see anything,” he insisted, a little exasperated.

Silky puffed out her cheeks and, staring hard at him, demanded, “Then what color were they?” The way she said it was so sweet that Felix smiled despite himself. “There! I knew it! You *did* see!” Silky, bright red once more, began to beat her fists against his head. Felix was standing there powerless to do anything about this, when an irritated voice carried out to them.

“How long are you going to stay messing around out there?”

“I’m not messing around!”

“Just get back inside! Now!” The door opened soundlessly and Silky pressed herself against Felix’s ear.

“Lassara’s just jealous of us, Felix,” she whispered. With a satisfied sniff, she shot off into the hut. Usually, Silky’s boundary magecraft turned the inside of the hut into a tangled maze, in case of intruders, but today she must have lifted the spell, because Felix immediately came eye to eye with a small girl who stood waiting in the center of the room.

“It’s good to see you again, Lady Lassara.” Felix bowed low and respectfully, just as he had with Vajra.

“Now see here, youngster! How many times do I have to drum it into you before you remember to call me ‘Great Mage Lassara’?” the girl exclaimed, stamping her foot in a rage. This reminded Felix so much of Silky that he had to work hard to stop himself from smiling. “You’d better not be laughing at me.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it,” Felix said deferentially. Lassara snorted.

Though she looked like a young girl, she was, in fact, well over two hundred years old. She was a living legend, exactly the sort of person to reside in these uninhabited lands. Apparently, her appearance had remained unchanged ever since the moment she’d inherited the Glimmering Heart mage circle. In spite of this, she was not immortal. Through the use of a secret method known as the Longevity Principle, foreign even to magecraft, she kept herself forcibly affixed to this mortal coil. Her state now was so removed from the natural order of things that if the effect of the spell ever faded, she would drop dead on the

spot. Felix remembered how Lassara had laughed loudly as she told him as much, as if it had happened yesterday.

“Why the sour face all of a sudden?” Lassara was eyeing him suspiciously.

Silky fluttered around him, saying, “Hey, what’s wrong? Felix? What’s wrong?”

“I beg your pardon. I became lost in my thoughts.”

“You’re such a conundrum. I bet you were thinking about that war, eh? People never change, always waging their pointless wars. Such an idiotic species.” Lassara closed her eyes and sighed deeply.

She had lived a long time, so long Felix couldn’t even imagine it. Her words now touched his heart in a way no others could.

“I agree completely, Lady Lassara,” he said, rubbing the back of his neck.

“What?! I worried about you for nothing?!” Silky cried, aiming a kick at Felix’s head.

“Anyway, what’s brought you to me, youngster? I’m not the least bit lonesome, you know,” she said quickly. “That meddlesome mutt, sticking its nose in where it’s not wanted...” Opening her eyes, Lassara let out a loud, angry *tsk*. Felix took from this that she had been listening to his conversation with Vajra. There had been no sign of her whatsoever, of course. She had probably—certainly, even—used magecraft to eavesdrop. Without exaggeration, Lassara was the greatest mage alive in that age.

II

“The thing is...” Felix said, then began to tell her about the mages of the Holy Land of Mekia. Lassara made the odd noise here and there to show she was listening; then, when he had finished, she sighed and ran her fingers through her hair.

“Well, I’d say you’re right in your estimation that they’re battle mages. Really, magecraft was brought into the world to improve human life, but these days, it’s become nothing but a tool for war. It’s disgusting, really.”

Lassara sounded fed up, but as Felix observed her in silence, he saw there was also a note of sadness in her eyes. Noticing him looking, Lassara coughed awkwardly.

“But putting that aside, this Mekia has at least three mages, you say? A bumper crop, that is. So far as I know, there aren’t that many mages in any other land.”

“Mages are in and of themselves very rare.” Even the empire had only Lassara herself. He had never heard of any existing in the Kingdom of Fernest, nor in the United City-States of Sutherland. Mekia might have been home to the Artemiana Cathedral, which engaged in the training of mages, but even then, it was an anomaly.

“From what you’ve said, it sounds like these mages are proficient in their craft despite their youth. It won’t do to underestimate Mekia just because it’s small.”

Felix nodded in strong agreement. “You’re right. And that is why I am here—to borrow your wisdom.”

“My wisdom? What wisdom might that be?” Lassara asked, eyes narrowed.

“It’s cruel to tease, Lady Lassara. I’m sure you know what I mean.”

“I haven’t the foggiest, youngster. I can’t imagine even a pack of powerful mages would give *you* any trouble.”

“Perhaps not I, but the soldiers...” Felix said. “I am working on a defense strategy, but it isn’t perfect. At worst, it will mean my taking on three mages at once.”

“If you’re so worried about your soldiers, why not just give up on war altogether? It’s simple logic, really.”

“I know, right? Why are humans always waging wars and killing themselves off for no reason? I don’t understand it at all. It doesn’t make any sense.”

Felix could only smile helplessly at the casual way Lassara and Silky discussed the matter. Fairies truly were in danger of dying out as a species, so he supposed for Silky it truly would be incomprehensible. But so far as it was the will of Emperor Ramza, there was nothing Felix could do about it.

“Isn’t there something you can do?” Felix asked, bowing low once more. Lassara drew herself up to her full height.

“Well, if the Great Mage Lassara were to take the field, we wouldn’t be talking about this. No matter how skilled these mages are, it wouldn’t give *me* any trouble to drive them off. But there’s one problem.” Here Lassara paused and smirked. There was a malicious edge to her smile that gave Felix a sense of foreboding.

“As you well know, youngster, I’ve retired from the world. On top of that, I have no obligation to the current emperor. As such, I reject your request,” she finished with a short laugh.

Lassara had, in the first place, cut all ties with worldly concerns because of her disgust with the way people abused magecraft for their own convenience. That was why she had shut herself up in the White Forest. It was a place that no one would ever be able to force her to return from. No one would risk their lives braving a forest infested with dangerous beasts. Felix had seen her response coming to a degree, but he still couldn’t help feeling disappointed. He was left without any idea of what to do.

While he stood there, Silky went and landed on Lassara’s head.

“You’re so mean, Lassara!” she said, laying into Lassara’s skull with her little feet. “I’ll help you instead, Felix.”

Before Felix could reply, however, Lassara swatted Silky away in irritation, then said grumpily, “Fine, go show the humans that the fairies of their made-up stories are real. They’ll be only too happy to hunt and catch you.”

“As *if*. Those dull old humans could never catch *me*!” Silky retorted, shooting away here and there all around the room before settling once more on Felix’s shoulder. She poked her tiny tongue out at Lassara.

“Catching things is what humans do. They’re not all like the youngster here. Go out and meet some, and you’ll catch my drift soon enough.” Lassara looked a little ashamed after this outburst. Felix beckoned to Silky and looked into her clear green eyes.

“What Lassara says is true,” he told her. “After one look at you, it’s a rare

person who'd leave you be. There'd be no end of those who'd try to catch you and put you on display. So while I am glad of your sentiments, I cannot accept your help."

"You're worried about me, Felix?" Silky asked, intensity in her gaze. "Am I important to you?"

"I am worried about you, and you are very important to me," Felix replied sincerely. "That is why I want you to stay here. Here, there is no chance of any humans other than me showing up."

"I see..." Silky drew close to Felix's cheek and gave him a tiny, halting kiss. Felix was taken aback, while Silky, her cheeks reddening, flew from the room with a happy smile.

Lassara broke the silence that followed. "When did you get so good with the ladies, eh?"

"I'm not trying to do anything like that..." Felix said, scratching his cheek to hide his embarrassment as Lassara's gaze skewered him.

"Well, no matter. Is anything else worrying you? You might look all cool and collected, but there's a lot that shows on your face."

Lassara's intuition was sharp as always. Felix felt a private wave of admiration. And so, he began to tell her of the greatest threat the empire currently faced...

III

"So there's a girl they call the Death God, eh?" After hearing what Felix had to say, Lassara was left with the sense that the nebulous unease she'd been feeling since the war had begun lined up with this girl they called the Death God. She had lived for two hundred years, and to her knowledge, there had been only a few others to whom that moniker had been applied. In every case, it was in recognition of rare talent on the battlefield and the power to strike terror into their enemies. You could say that the name "death god" was a title only conferred upon the truly strong.

But this girl seemed different from those others. First of all, she was one of the Deep Folk, the rivals of the Asura, which meant she was no ordinary strong

warrior. And then there was this enduring unease.

The legendary nature of the tale made it challenging to draw conclusions, but Lassara's impression was that the Asura and the Deep Folk were more or less evenly matched. She wondered what made Felix wary to the extreme of this girl.

The youngster's instincts might be reacting to something lurking behind the death god girl—this uneasiness hanging over Duvedirica like storm clouds, she mused, looking at Felix in his armor. The truly strong are more finely attuned to danger than is ordinary, after all.

"In my opinion, there is no greater obstacle currently faced by the empire than Olivia Valedstorm. Unification will be impossible unless we can stop her." Felix looked serious. The idea of one girl standing in the way of the unification of the continent would sound like rife exaggeration to the ears of anyone else. If it had come from anyone other than Felix, Lassara might have laughed them off, though she never in a thousand years would have admitted as much to him.

"So even the Asura have to tread carefully when they've got Deep Folk on their hands..." she said, then paused. "Hold up there. Did you say 'Olivia Valedstorm' just now?"

"Yes, I did. Does that mean something?" Felix asked, looking perplexed. Lassara tugged on the end of a buried memory, dragging it up to the surface.

"I'd just heard the name Valedstorm before. I think it was that book..." On the other side of the table in the middle of the room was a wall lined with books. Lassara pointed at it, and it immediately began to shake and rattle until eventually, one book with a black cover flew from the shelf and came drifting over to Lassara's hand.

Felix leaned over to peer at the book. "*The Clan of Darkness* by Angus Iem White," he read in a tone of significance. Lassara ignored him and began to rifle through the pages.

"This happened one hundred and fifty years ago," she said, eyes running down the page. "Some charge was laid against the House of Valedstorm, who were known for their undying loyalty. Not half a month passed before the kingdom sent its armies to surround their estate, bombarding it with fire and

killing them all. And that was it for the Valedstorms. They vanished from history.” Here Lassara paused and looked at Felix. His well-shaped eyebrows were drawn down.

“A clan known for their undying loyalty, all dead before a month was out? Something seems very off about that to me...” he said. “Was it normal back then?”

“Oh, no. Usually, you’d be right. It could’ve been the age itself that drove it to happen.”

“The era drove it to happen? This was a hundred and fifty years ago, so the ninth century of Tempus Fugit...” Felix thought for a moment. “I see. The so-called Age of Darkness?” With that, he fell silent.

In the ninth century of Tempus Fugit, all the nations of Duvedirica, with the exception of the empire, had waged endless wars as though possessed by demons. It was an era where the stench of blood hung in every land, and the weak, unable to find even crumbs to eat, were left to waste away and die. The great nation of Fernest was no exception, reduced to a state that Lassara, who had lived through those times, couldn’t bear to contemplate.

“But even that doesn’t account for why they were all killed,” Felix said eventually. “Just what was this charge laid against the Valedstorms?”

“Well now, the charge was that they were the descendants of some small tribe—the ‘Clan of Darkness’ from the book’s title—who in ancient times had used their incredible fighting abilities in a plot to overthrow the nation. At least, that’s what the tip-off said.”

“Ancient times and incredible fighting abilities...” Felix repeated, awareness dawning. “It can’t be?!”

Lassara nodded with a baleful grin. “Of course you get it, youngster, being descended from the Asura. That’s right, like as not, the Clan of Darkness refers to the Deep Folk. The winners gave the losers a bad name—happens all the time. In the book here, it says no evidence of treason ever showed up, but the accusation itself wasn’t actually false, even if the Valedstorms didn’t have the slightest wish to harm the king.”

“And I suppose it was the Asura who gave the king the tip-off,” Felix said slowly. With a deep sigh, he threw himself down on a nearby chair.

“No doubt of that, I’d say, though it’s a mystery how they worked out that the Valedstorms and the Deep Folk were one and the same. Some of *your* friends might have a bit to say on that, youngster.”

“I don’t think of them as my friends,” Felix said with an uncharacteristic grimace. Too late, Lassara remembered the abhorrence Felix had for the assassin’s blood that ran through his veins and for the Asura, who to this day made assassination their profession. Privately, she shook her head at her own carelessness.

“Well, anyway,” she went on, “I don’t know how much influence the Asura had over Fernest in those days, but it must’ve been enough for the king to believe the loyal Valedstorms were usurpers and oust them. Not a chance he would have listened to slander coming from just anyone.”

All countries had their dark secrets. The fact was that you couldn’t keep a nation going with high-flown ideals alone. The Asura, that league of matchless assassins, were supposed to be involved in many matters that could never be brought to light, some of which, if exposed, could change the fate of whole nations. Looked at in another light, this was firm proof that they could be trusted to never reveal any of the information they gleaned to outsiders. Lassara suspected that it was this that had made the king inclined to believe their tip-off.

“That...that might be right.” A look of disgust came across his face, as though he had remembered something.

“And now, whether through fate or coincidence, this Death God Olivia has revived the broken line of the Valedstorms.”

“Which do you think it is, Lady Lassara?”

“Me? I’d say fate. It’s a bit much to think all of this is coincidence.”

“I agree,” Felix said without hesitation.

“But that’s not the bit you ought to be worried about. The puzzle comes in this bit—while the Valedstorm estate was burning to the ground, a misty black

shape flew out of the window.” Lassara tapped the page open before her with her hand and stared intently at Felix.

“A black shape... No!”

“There you go. You said it yourself, youngster. The ebony blade this Olivia Valedstorm wields emits a black mist. I can’t help but think those two things are connected.”

“Assuming that to be the case,” Felix said slowly, “what does that make you think?”

Lassara rubbed her chin thoughtfully for a while, then regarded Felix. “When I first heard your story, I thought Olivia was a mage.”

“You what?!” Felix half stood up, but Lassara pushed him back into his chair. He looked like he wanted to say something, but Lassara went on before he could.

“Don’t rush me, youngster. Listen ’til I’m done. That’s what I thought *at first*, but something didn’t sit right. It’s just a feeling, so it’s hard to put into words, but...” Lassara paused, then said, “Olivia hasn’t used magecraft in her battles with the empire, has she?”

“No. If she had, it would absolutely have come up in reports,” Felix said with certainty.

In that case, Lassara thought. Setting aside the subject for the moment, she turned to him. “Earlier I told you I thought the black shape and the black mist were connected, did I not?”

“You did indeed say that.”

“Well, I think they’re connected, but while they might sound the same, they’re actually different. Like the difference between a sword you use in battle and a sword you use in a ceremony. Does that make sense?” Lassara asked, aware of how bad she was at explanations. As she’d expected, Felix’s reply was ambivalent.

“Now, bear in mind that the rest of this is just my musings.” She took a breath, then began. “There’s the crest of the House of Valedstorm, which calls

up the idea of a god of death, and the ebony blade with its black mist. Then there's this mysterious misty black shape that flew out the window of the burning Valedstorm estate. Drawing all these together, what conclusion do we reach? That behind the House of Valedstorm, there lurks some being beyond human understanding. That's what I think."

And that'll be the source of this unease that's been plaguing me these past few years, she thought to herself.

"Lady Lassara, you're not really saying that there's a *real* death god out there, are you?" Felix asked. The exasperation in his voice was slight but unmistakable.

"All right, I'll put it another way. Where's the proof that there's not?"

"I don't need any," Felix replied, his lips curling. "Death gods are the stuff of fantasy."

Lassara replied to this with a loud snort of laughter. Then, she pointed at the door. "Let me ask you this, then. How would you explain Silky Breeze? You go on with her like it's the most natural thing in the world, but to the rest of the world, she's a fantasy creature."

Felix didn't have anything to say to that.

"Then there's the mutt out there. There are people who worship it as a god, you know. And they say back in ancient times, people with powers existed everywhere—the Asura and the Deep Folk being just a few examples. So if there *was* a real God of Death, surely it wouldn't be so unbelievable."

"I don't have enough material to argue with you on this right now," Felix said at length. He leaned back in his chair, looking exhausted.

"I will say that I'm only *calling* whatever this is a God of Death because I don't have any better name for it," Lassara said. "You know, I wonder if humans lost the powers we once had as the price we paid for the advance of civilization." Perhaps one day she too would lose her magecraft. There were dramatically fewer mages now than there had been, and out in the world, more and more people were coming to think of them as the stuff of fantasy. Lassara wasn't saddened by this, however. Everything was swept along by the flow of time.

I expect even this dry and withered life of mine that I've stretched on and on

with the Longevity Principle will wear out before too long. He is so young. What will I be able to leave for him, in the end?

As Felix sat there, quiet and unspeaking, Lassara felt she could have gazed at him forever.

Epilogue: The Light of Dawn

Galia Fortress

Galia Fortress was housing a host of soldiers of a size never before seen in preparation for the coming decisive battle. Two men stood on the fortress walls, looking out on the rays of the sun breaking through the Ceratonis Mountains. One was Cornelius vim Gruening, field marshal of the Royal Army. The other was Senior General Paul von Baltza, now the second most important man in the Royal Army, who had won glory in the Battle of Carnac.

“You aren’t subtle, though, are you, Lord Marshal? Breaking up the gray hairs and the young folk so brazenly.”

“I suppose so,” Cornelius said, his mouth crinkling in amusement. The corners of Paul’s own mouth twisted despite himself. If you added the ages of Olivia and Blood, who were heading the invasion of Olsted, you’d only get around fifty. Meanwhile he and Cornelius, who would attack Kier Fortress, had an average age of sixty-five. Paul couldn’t help but feel his age when he considered that he already had more years behind him than the younger pair combined.

“But I believe you made the correct decision,” Paul said. “We can’t allow the empire to work out that the attack on Kier Fortress is no more than a distraction. Lieutenant—that is, General Blood is lacking in caution, and that’s not to mention Major General Olivia. It’s a little too heavy of a task for them.”

“With General Blood’s wiles, I imagine you are the only one in the whole Royal Army who thinks of him like that, Paul.”

“He *is* incautious; that is a fact.”

Cornelius chuckled. “Once a teacher, always a teacher...” he said. “It appears you are putting a lot of faith in Major General Olivia as usual, though.”

“Not as much as you when you made her commander of the Eighth Legion, but since her days in the Seventh Legion, she has yet to disappoint me,” Paul said proudly. Cornelius nodded.

“It’s true that without her, the two of us would likely be having this conversation in the land of the dead.”

“Well, I don’t know about that...”

Cornelius looked over at the flags that flew from the fortress spires, scarlet and embroidered with the cup and lions of Fernest. Paul followed his gaze.

“There’s no one here but us. There’s no need to dress up our words,” Cornelius said. Paul was silent. “The gods haven’t yet abandoned us—abandoned *Fernest*—entirely. They sent a little war goddess into our midst, after all.”

“It will be a great battle, this time,” Paul said at length. “Do you think we can win?” No sooner had he said it than he reflected that the question was unlike him. He must have been driven to ask it by the great unease that brewed in his heart. The Crimson and Helios Knights had lost many of their forces, but they were still on the board, and the empire’s most elite Azure Knights remained in Olsted, as yet without casualties.

“We will win,” Cornelius said decisively, perhaps sensing Paul’s unease. “We must, for the future of the kingdom. Besides, this time, we have the forces of Mekia behind us.”

“About Mekia...” Paul said. “Just how far do you trust her—Sofitia Hell Mekia, that is? In all honesty, I can’t work out what it is she’s after...”

Sofitia Hell Mekia had made two requests in exchange for her support. The first was a hundred thousand gold pieces. The second was that they ceded part of Fernest’s domains to Mekia. Neither was a trivial demand by any means, but given the dilemma Fernest was facing, they were hardly unreasonable. The figure named had been just within their power, as though Sofitia knew the precise details of their financial situation, and that in the end Alfonse had agreed to the terms only made this more apparent.

“I don’t trust her a whit,” Cornelius said plainly.

“Not at all?”

“The money and the ceding of domains are nothing more than a smokescreen. She might seem meek and mild, but there was a piercing gleam in

those eyes of hers. Make no mistake, Sofitia Hell Mekia is plotting something. She is the picture of a general with great ambitions.”

“If you could see all that, Lord Marshal, why didn’t you caution his majesty?”

“I’m afraid that woman already has the king wrapped around her finger. Even if I tried to caution him, he would not listen. The best I could expect would be to weather his displeasure.” Cornelius said this with a bitter smile. Paul remembered all the ways Alfonse had gone out of his way to accommodate Sofitia. The king wasn’t the only one. Paul knew how most of the attendees at the dinner party had stared at Sofitia with adoration in their eyes.

It was always at the turn of an era that one born with the ability to inspire people—in other words, the quality of a true monarch—would mysteriously appear. Sofitia was a perfect example of this.

“Besides that, our armies are stretched thin. Meanwhile, the Mekians have such unassailable strength that they were able to drive back the Stonian Army with half their enemy’s numbers. Even if Sofitia Hell Mekia *is* plotting something, if she were to turn that strength on us, we would be hard-pressed to shake her off.”

Paul had heard that the Mekian army numbered thirty thousand soldiers. If the stories of its prowess were true, their aid would be invaluable.

“It’s true that theirs isn’t a force we can simply brush aside.”

“At the end of the day, this is an alliance built on sand. At present, there is a mutual advantage to be had. When that advantage is lost, it will crumble in a moment. We must at the very least stay on our guard.”

“I will be as cautious as I can,” Paul agreed. “Now, excuse my changing the subject, but I heard that Major General Olivia received a formal invitation to visit the Holy Land of Mekia. You aren’t just going to let her *go*, are you?”

Cornelius’s dark blue eyes grew misty. “I’m afraid that is just what is going to happen. His Majesty gave his permission before I had time to stop him. I believe she is scheduled to depart for Mekia today.”

Though he knew Cornelius was not to blame, Paul couldn’t hold in a sigh of frustration.

“I’m sorry,” Cornelius said ruefully. “Having said that, it seems some change has occurred within His Majesty, though I know not what it is. He has become significantly more receptive of late.”

“His ceding control of the army to you was certainly a bolt from the blue. If the First Legion hadn’t marched, we would have been destroyed on the central front.”

Cornelius cleared his throat, with a look on his face as though he were remembering something, then said, “His Majesty has publicly announced that he has accepted this invitation to strengthen the alliance between our two nations—which is not wrong, in and of itself.”

“Still, we must urge them to take the utmost care. Sofitia Hell Mekia didn’t invite just anyone, after all; she invited Major General Olivia.”

The Holy Land of Mekia lay far to the west of Duvedirica. It hardly seemed likely that Olivia’s reputation had stretched that far, but Sofitia could easily have heard the stories while staying in the capital. It wouldn’t be unusual for her to become interested in Olivia.

But even so, this smells rotten to me, Paul thought. With the alliance in place, they wouldn’t harm Olivia, but Paul had the nose of a veteran soldier, and it was picking something up.

“I have of course instructed Major General Olivia to be careful. We can’t have her treating this like a sightseeing trip, after all.”

“Trust you to think of that, Lord Marshal.”

“Though to be frank, there was no need to warn her.”

“What does that mean?”

“Major General Olivia understood that much without my telling her. Of course, she would. She has the likes of Lieutenant Claudia swearing to protect her no matter what happens. She could do with easing up a little, perhaps, but I imagine Mekia will be a good diversion for her. Ah, that looks like Major General Olivia departing now.”

Paul looked down and saw Olivia on a black horse, waving up at them.

He chuckled. "I don't know how she can make us out at this distance," he said, waving back cheerfully at her. Cornelius waved too, stroking his magnificent beard as he did so. Olivia responded with an even bigger wave.

"We have to make sure that girl lives," Cornelius said at length.

"No matter what. Besides, the rule since ancient times has been that the gray beards die first."

"Ancient times, is it? Well then, I suppose I shall be the first to go," Cornelius laughed.

"Well, if you'll forgive my being perfectly frank, yes," Paul said. "You know, I haven't seen that expression on you in a while, Lord Marshal."

Cornelius's fighting spirit burned quiet but sure in his eyes. The look on the old man's face reminded Paul of the days of their youth when they had fought side by side on the battlefield.

Cornelius chuckled. "The same goes for you, Paul. The battle to come will be all-out war, no mistake. I look forward to seeing the God of the Battlefield awaken from his long slumber."

A trumpet blared, announcing Olivia's departure. In the light of dawn, Paul's shadow stretched out dark and menacing behind him, like some fierce god.



Afterword

I remember it was early spring when I wrote the afterword to volume three, yet somehow now I can already hear winter's footfalls loud and clear XD. This is Ayamine, feeling like lately the years have been passing way too fast.

So, this volume was focused on two big battles—the Holy Land of Mekia vs. the Principality of Stonia, then Fernest vs. the United City-States of Sutherland. From here, we're heading into the most interesting part of the story, and the plan (though plans go awry!) is for big things to start happening. I hope you'll stay with me as we go forward.

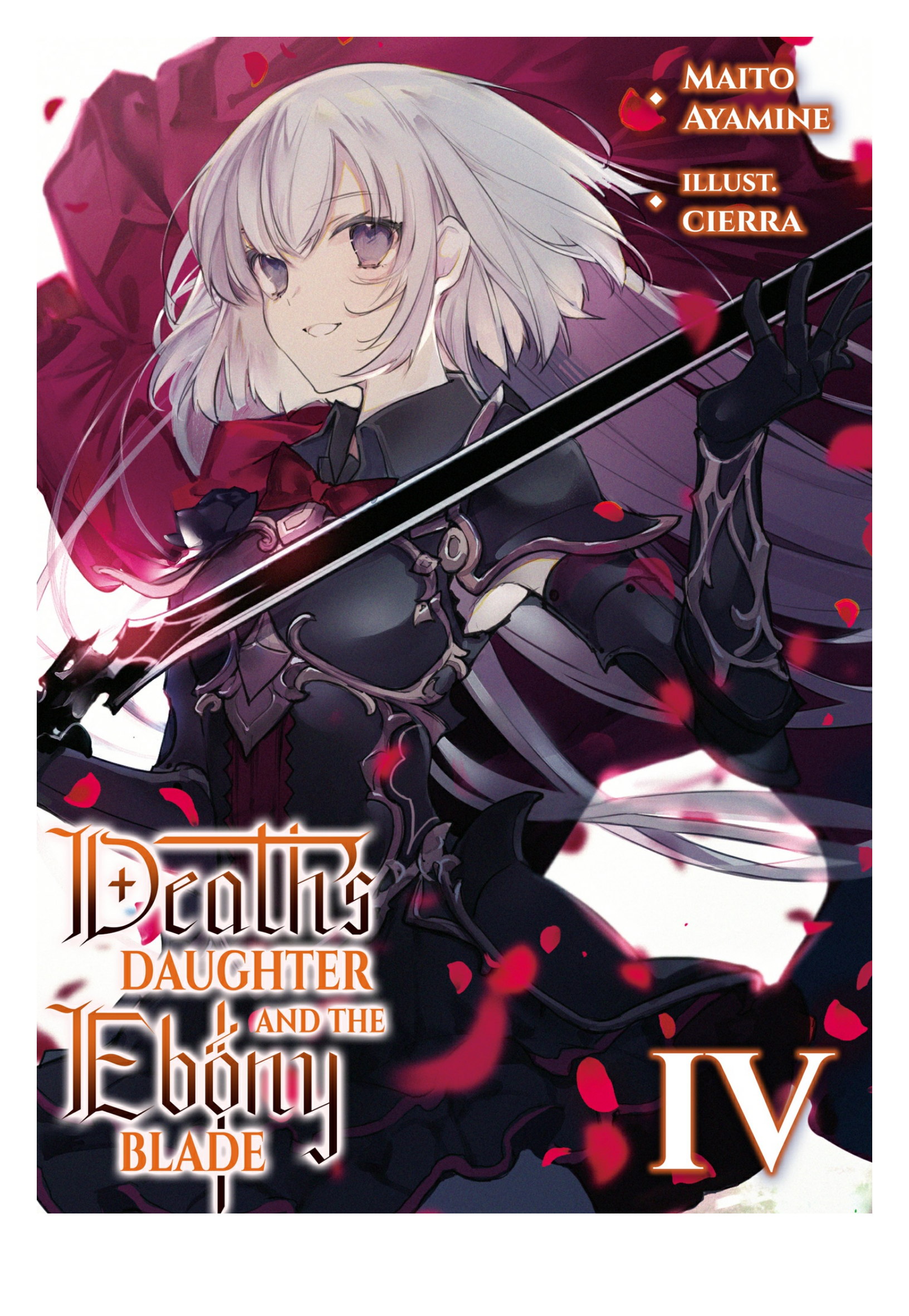
And that was Death's Daughter and the Ebony Blade Volume 4. Now, some words of thanks. To my editor, Higuchi-sama. Time and time again you've saved me with your sage advice! Thank you!

To Cierra-sama. I can honestly say Olivia's general uniform was the absolute best!

Finally, the manga edition of Death's Daughter and the Ebony Blade Volume 1 is scheduled for release this month. It's insanely good (I actually thought, "Huh? This is better than the novel!" more than a few times... ha ha...) so please pick it up if you come across it in stores.

Now, to all of you who have read this far: may the blessings of Strecia go with you.

Ayamine Maito



MAITO
AYAMINE

ILLUST.
CIERRA

Death's
DAUGHTER
AND THE
Ebony
BLADE

IV

High-level binding magecraft: *Verdantwine Myriad*

Johann
Strider

Amelia
Stolast

High-level flame magecraft: *Blazered Shower*





Olivia
Valedstorm

Ellis
Crawford

Death's
DAUGHTER
AND THE
Ebony
BLADE

◆ MAITO
AYAMINE

◆ ILLUST.
CIERRA



Bonus Short Stories

A Fourth Day With Olivia and Claudia

Claudia's Room at Galia Fortress

I've an early start tomorrow. Time for bed, I think...

Claudia bookmarked her place in the book she was reading and readied herself for bed when there came a brisk knock at the door.

"Claudia? Are you there?"

The general? What could she want at this hour?

"Just a moment, I'll let you in." She opened the door to find herself face to face with Olivia clad in only a nightgown. "You didn't come here wearing that?!" she exclaimed.

"Huh? Is there something wrong with it?" Olivia cocked her head, puzzled.

"That should be obvious!" Claudia quickly scanned the corridor to make sure they were alone, then seized Olivia and hastily pulled her into the room. "If the men saw you dressed like that, it'd cause an uproar."

"Why would seeing me put the men in an uproar?" Olivia asked curiously, looking herself over. Her black lace nightgown clung suggestively to the curves of her body, but despite the indescribable allure that oozed from every inch of her, she herself seemed totally oblivious to it.

Ashton could never be allowed to see her like this.

"The point is," Claudia said, "you can't wander around the fortress looking like that. Next time you go for a walk, please put your uniform on properly."

"Oh, but it's such a *hass*—"

"Do we have an understanding?"

"R-Right. You got it." Olivia nodded fervently.

“Now, what are you doing here in the middle of the night?”

“My bed broke, so I wondered if I could share with you here.”

“You *what*? Are you trying to ask if I’ll let you sleep here?”

“Yeah, that’s what I thought I said...” Olivia replied. “You don’t mind, right?” Without waiting for a response, she jumped right into Claudia’s bed and snuggled in. As Claudia gaped, half of Olivia’s face emerged from the blankets, along with a hand that beckoned to her. “Hurry up, it’s bedtime.”

“Uh, um, right...”

If Olivia’s bed was broken, Claudia could hardly turn her away. Feeling an odd chill run down her spine even as she did so, Claudia got into bed as well.

“Sleeping together is fun, isn’t it?” Olivia said, grinning. Claudia could only force a smile in return. The indescribable sense of tension that filled her was a far cry from what she’d call ‘fun.’ Still, she went along with Olivia’s chattering for a while, until— “Oh, that’s right! So there was this one time, I asked Ashton if I could sleep with him, too. Then—”

“You didn’t sleep in the same bed as him, did you?!” Before she realized what she was doing, Claudia had bolted upright. Olivia looked at her curiously.

“What’s up? You look like you saw a ghost.”

“Oh, uh.. It’s nothing. So *did* you?” she asked hesitantly, already clenching her fist in case the answer was yes.

“Nope. When I suggested it, you wouldn’t *believe* how fast he ran away. I wonder why?”

“I—I see.” Nothing had happened. Claudia felt a rush of relief.

Well, it’s not like Ashton has it in him to try anything anyway...

“By the way, General, about tomorrow’s sche—and she’s already asleep.” Claudia sighed. Olivia apparently had no trouble dropping off, already breathing peacefully and fast asleep. Watching her, Claudia found herself wondering if maybe there wasn’t something to the whole business of “beauty sleep” after all.

The next day—

“Good morning, Claudia!”

There was a pause, before Claudia managed a bleary, “Good morning.”

“You still look pretty sleepy,” Olivia observed.

“Mm... Yeah...”

While Olivia awoke bright and refreshed, Claudia could barely keep her eyes open. In the end, she hadn’t slept a wink.

A Second Day With Olivia and Blood

The Kingdom of Fernest

It was a few days after the war council had decided upon the counteroffensive that was to be launched against the empire. Blood had finished up adding troops to the Second Legion and making the requisite logistical adjustments, and thought he’d grab a bite to eat before returning to the legion. When he poked his head into the mess hall, his eyes found a girl with silver hair.

Struck by an impulse to mischief, he thought, *Let’s give her a bit of a scare...* He quickly ordered his food, then softly crept up behind Olivia.

“Blood?” She called his name without even turning around.

“How did you know it was me?”

“Your footsteps.”

“My footsteps? I thought I was walking silently...” He sat down just as his food was brought out. “Ah, good. Some refreshment before I go back to the Second Legion.”

“Hmm,” Olivia replied without interest. Blood gave a crooked smile.

“By the way, I hear you were promoted to major general,” he said. “My congratulations.”

“Thanks...” Olivia said despondently. Blood, who was used to her usual

manner, found this fascinating. He did know, having heard it from Claudia, that Olivia wasn't interested in promotion, but he didn't see why it should make her this unhappy.

"Did something happen?" he asked.

"Major general is a higher rank than senior colonel, right?"

"Yes, I suppose so."

"Well, just before..." Olivia told him about how she had run into Otto and tried to pull rank on him. She then told him how Otto had entirely turned the tables on her. When she finished, Blood couldn't help himself. He burst out laughing. It was just too much to imagine the faces of the imperial soldiers if they ever heard that the Death God they all feared so much was moping after being dressed down by Otto, now her *junior officer*.

Olivia puffed out her cheeks and glared at him, and, realizing he'd made her cross, Blood forced his laughter back down.

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't laugh. Only, from what you've said, I don't think Otto was trying to be mean."

People might call him the Man in the Iron Mask behind his back, but Blood knew Otto secretly cared. What he'd done wouldn't have been out of jealousy, but rather his own way of showing concern for Olivia, made a legion commander at such a young age.

Might be a bit much to expect Liv to understand that, though, he thought.

Olivia looked at him doubtfully. "Really?" she said.

"Probably. But look, Liv, you're a major general now. All you've got to do is hold your head high, even when it's the Man in the Iron Mask you're dealing with."

"Right... Right! Thanks!" Olivia brightened immediately, then set about shoveling food into her mouth with gusto. Blood watched this with appalled fascination.

"So *this* is where you've been, ser..." He heard an icy voice from behind him. Afraid of what he was going to see, Blood turned and found himself face to face

with Lise. She saluted with one hand, the other carrying a pile of documents. Olivia returned the salute, her jaw still working furiously.

“I just met Liv here by coincidence and we ended up eating together, that’s all,” Blood said quickly.

“I don’t believe I said anything.”

Your face is telling me everything I need to know! Blood retorted privately, but he did his best to keep his face impassive.

“I’ll be there as soon as I’m done eating.”

“I see. Then I won’t impose any further, *General Lecher*,” Lise replied. Before Blood could say anything more, she turned on her heel and walked briskly away.

“Are you really General Lecher?” Olivia asked. Her eyes were clear and earnest.

“That’s right,” Blood snapped back, stabbing his fork into his food.

A Day With Olivia and Riful

A refreshing breeze wove across the plains, carrying with it the scent of flowers. Olivia was lying there asleep when a shadow fell over her face.

“Is that you, Riful?” She said, not opening her eyes.

“You didn’t even look...” Riful mumbled. “How did you know?”

“You feel different from other people,” Olivia explained. There was also the way she walked—in particular, the way she shifted her weight—but there was no need to go into that much detail.

“No one other than Major General Olivia...ever sensed...me.”

“Really?” Olivia opened her eyes and saw Riful peering at her, puzzled. “Do you need something?” She asked, brushing herself off. In response, Riful asked her for a duel.

“Why do you want to duel me?”

“I’m...one of the ten...swords... They call you Death God Olivia...so I want to know how...you fight.”

“I mean, I don’t mind...” Olivia drew her sword, thinking as she did so that Riful looked pretty sleepy for a person who claimed to be interested. But the moment Riful drew her own sword in response, the sleepiness vanished, replaced by a knife-like intensity.

“Now we...fight.” Riful leaned forwards before closing the distance between them in an instant. Olivia caught her sweeping strike in the middle of her blade, and Riful twisted gracefully to come around and throw a kick at her side. As Olivia blocked this with her arm, she noted that Riful’s fighting style seemed to combine elements of both swordplay and martial arts.

Riful leapt far back, putting distance between them.

“You Ten Sword fighters aren’t too shabby, are you?”

Riful didn’t reply, but began to advance again, holding her blade directly in front of her and letting the tip weave through the air. As she approached, slow but unflinching, the single blade of her sword seemed to multiply, coming in to strike at Olivia in a strike from a myriad of angles. Olivia planted her foot solidly on the ground, then—

Riful was too shocked to move as the point of the ebony blade came to rest against the back of her neck. She dropped her sword, after which the orchestra in Olivia’s stomach launched into a rousing tune.

“I’m hungry,” she announced. “We can wrap this up, right?”

“Thank you, Great Master...Olivia. I am glad to see...there is more for...me.” Riful picked up her sword and returned it to its scabbard, then bowed deeply.

“No need to thank—did you just call me ‘Great Master’?”

“Riful will let you...go...Great Master Olivia.” And humming to herself, Riful left Olivia there utterly confused.

“I wonder what she meant by ‘more’?” Olivia watched Riful go, unable to work out how Riful could be so cheerful even when she’d lost.

A Fourth Day With Olivia and Ashton

The Training Hall at Galia Fortress

Ashton was carefully going through the work of cleaning his sword when Olivia came over to him, blowing on a whistle she'd made from a leaf. Four days had passed since the reports had come that Northern Perscilla, the Twelfth City of the United City-States of Sutherland, appeared to be considering an invasion of the Kingdom of Fernest.

"Carefree as usual, I see," Ashton said. "Even now, with Northern Perscilla bearing down on us."

"Would it be better if I looked serious, then?" She screwed up her face in what she apparently thought was a serious expression, but unfortunately only ended up looking adorable.

"That's not much different from before."

"Serious faces are serious business, huh?" Olivia said, giving up. "Anyway, what are you doing?"

"Obvious, isn't it?"

"Are you perhaps...cleaning your sword?"

"I am, no 'perhaps' about it," Ashton snapped as he polished the middle section of the blade. Olivia looked dubious. Most likely, she thought him looking after his sword was a wasted effort.

"Look, no matter how many big, strong bodyguards you give me, you never know what could happen in battle, do you? I'm not wasting my time."

"I didn't say you were, did I?"

"It's your eyes. Your eyes were saying it."

"My eyes?" Olivia burst out laughing. "But eyes don't have mouths. You're so silly, Ashton."

Ashton took great pains to make sure she couldn't miss the glare he gave her in response. Who'd said anything about eyes having *mouths*?

“Anyway, did you want something from me?”

“Right! I thought we could eat dinner together, so I came to ask you.”

“Dinner?” Ashton looked up at the clock on the wall and saw that it was indeed a reasonable hour to be thinking about dinner.

“So are you coming?”

“How can I, when I haven’t finished with my sword yet?”

“Oh, I’ll do it for you then.”

“What? Hey—!” Olivia tore the sword from Ashton’s hands then, with practiced ease, began to polish it. Before five minutes had passed, the blade was gleaming brightly. Ashton couldn’t have produced the same result no matter how long he’d spent on it.

“Right, all done.” Olivia returned the sword to its scabbard, then handed it back to him with a smile.

“Olivia,” he said slowly, accepting it, “is there anything you *can’t* handle?”

“You mean like food?”

“Why would I be asking about food?”

“Well in *that* case,” she replied, “manners. But you know that, don’t you?”

“‘In *that* case’? What’s that supposed to mean, ‘in that’—but I suppose that’s true, huh?” This was a girl who hated both speaking to *and* being around people who cared about proper manners. She’d even publicly announced that she’d accepted the post of major general because it would reduce how often she had to think about military formalities. In Olivia’s case, it made perfect sense.

“Why do you ask, anyway?” Olivia asked.

“No reason. It just randomly occurred to me.”

“Huh. You’re weird, Ashton.”

“*You’re* the weird one.”

“Um, pretty sure I’m totally normal.”

“No, no *way*. No one would ever call you normal.”

“Whatever. Hurry up and let’s go.” Olivia hooked her arm through his and pulled him off along with her.

Ashton watched her walking along beside him. *You are not normal*, he thought, and had to concentrate furiously to stop himself from blushing.

A Day With Olivia and Sara

Sara’s Room at Letitia Castle

Sara called Olivia to her room with the intention of fulfilling the promise they had made at Fort Peshitta.

“Oh, wow! There’s so many books! You really do love reading, don’t you, Princess?” Olivia’s eyes shone as she gazed at the books lining the shelves. Sara took a book with a blue cover from the shelf and invited Olivia to sit down on the sofa. “That’s *The Masked Knight Shalia*, isn’t it? How much do you like it?” Olivia asked.

“This is embarrassing, but enough that I started learning how to use a sword because I wanted to be like Shalia.”

“There’s nothing embarrassing about that. I mean, Masked Knight Shalia is the *coolest*.” Olivia stood up from the sofa and struck the pose Shalia always took when she delivered her signature line, just like she had at Fort Peshitta. At that moment, the butler came in bearing tea and sweets, fixing Olivia with a dubious stare that Sara found very funny.

“Now, let’s talk about Shalia to our heart’s content.”

“Okay!”

Sara spoke with avid enthusiasm. As Fourth Princess, she’d never had any real friends, and so it followed that she’d never had anyone to share *The Masked Knight Shalia* with. This made it all the more refreshing and appealing to her that Olivia acted perfectly natural around her.

“Princess Sara, the time...” The butler interjected with a courteous bow, and Sara looked up at the clock above the fireplace. They had been talking for almost two hours.

“It’s that time already?” She wanted to talk more, but today she had official princess duties waiting for her, so they would have to leave off here. “I had a wonderful time today, Olivia,” she said.

“Me too.”

“It was so funny hearing that you hung kitchen knives at your belt instead of swords to try and copy Shalia.”

“Well, I only had one sword,” Olivia laughed, and Sara had to laugh too.

“Princess Sara,” said the butler.

“Yes, I know.” She turned back to Olivia. “Do join me for another talk again one day.”

“Of course!” Olivia replied. Yet she made no move to stand up. Her unusual, ebony black eyes were fixed on the remaining sweets on the table.

“Do you want to take them with you?” Sara asked.

“What? Are you sure?”

“I don’t mind in the slightest.” She looked to the butler, who gathered up the sweets and swept them off to another room. Within five minutes he was back holding a pretty box.

“These are for you, miss,” he said. Olivia accepted the box awkwardly, and for some reason her face darkened.

“Whatever is the matter?” Sara asked.

“It’s just, Claudia...”

“Claudia? She’s your aide, is she not?”

“Right.”

“Did Claudia say something, then?”

“Well,” Olivia said at length, “it’s just that I totally forgot Claudia told me I wasn’t allowed to accept sweets and things when I went to visit important people.”

From Olivia’s demeanor, Sara thought Claudia must be very strict. Amused by

this unexpected side to the girl they called the Death God, Sara took paper and pen from her desk, wrote out a note, and handed it to Olivia.

It read: *The Fourth Princess gives Olivia permission to ask for sweets whenever she wishes.*

This was Sara's way of thanking her.

A Day With Olivia and Gile

It's almost finished... Gile was beating away with his hammer in a corner of the training grounds when he sensed a divine presence behind him. At once, he fell to his knees in a demonstration of fealty.

"What are you making in here?" Olivia asked, peering at his hands.

"I am making a throne, my lady."

"A throne? You mean the chair the king sits on? Why are *you* making one?"

To be sure, King Alfonse would have his own craftspeople to make his throne and furniture, but Gile perceived that Olivia was laboring under a significant misunderstanding.

"Not like that," he said, waving his hands. "It is for you that I am making this throne, Lady Olivia."

"For *me*?" she repeated. "But you're making a throne, aren't you?"

"That doesn't matter. Won't you try sitting in it?"

"Huh?"

"There, now." He ushered the bewildered Olivia into the chair. No sooner had she sat down than she looked up at him in astonishment. "How is it?" He asked.

"It's wonderful. I feel like it might suck me in. I've never sat in a chair like this before." Olivia went on feeling out the chair, clearly impressed.

"A little thing like this is nothing," he replied.

"You're good with your hands, aren't you, Gile? You skinned those animals we hunted like *that*, too. Oh, and that's right, when the bookshelf broke the other

day, you had it back up in no time.”

Gile had just happened to hear from Olivia that the bookshelf Ashton had built for her had broken. He’d wasted no time in bringing his tools and putting it back up. Olivia said she’d about half filled it with books when it broke, but this wasn’t Olivia’s fault—it was Ashton’s amateurish craftsmanship that was to blame. He’d added sliders to the shelves when he fixed them, which had made Olivia jump up and down for joy.

“It shouldn’t break again, but please call me if there is anything else you need.”

“I will!” Olivia replied. “It’s amazing how you made this chair the perfect size without measuring me or anything.” She told him about how, when she had her dress made for the victory banquet, she’d been surrounded by a crowd of women all taking her measurements. *Amateurs*, Gile thought, scoffing to himself “I pride myself on my perfect grasp of your figure, my lady,” he said.

“H-Huh...!” Olivia’s smile grew strained and she slowly backed away.

Gile, who had been basking in the beautiful smile she had lately frequently began to grace him with, saw Claudia coming towards them, her shoulders drawn up.

“Don’t think you’re going to get away with talking like that.”

While Olivia quailed, Gile clicked his heels and saluted. Claudia’s eyes narrowed and she bore down on him.

“What were you saying about the general’s figure?”

“I only said that I have a perfect grasp of her figure...” From her manner, it was clear Claudia was enraged, but he couldn’t for the life of him see why.

“*A perfect grasp of her figure?*”

“Yes, ser. As one in service to her ladyship, it’s only natural that I should.” Gile thought this should be self-explanatory, but at his answer, Claudia reached out and yanked hard on his ear.

“Owowowow!”

“We can’t talk here. Let’s take this elsewhere,” she hissed.

“Wha?! I don’t—Captain Olivia, please, help me!” He cried. But Olivia only turned away regretfully.

“I’m sorry, Gile,” she said quietly. “Humans have some things we can do, and some things we can’t.”

And so, Gile was dragged away by Claudia, without any idea what was happening.

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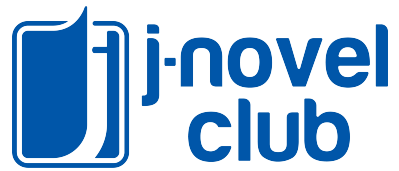
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Death's Daughter and the Ebony Blade: Volume 4

by Maito Ayamine

Sylvia Gallagher Edited by Ori Starling

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